

A black and white photograph of a dense forest. The trees have thick, gnarled trunks and branches, creating a complex web of lines against a lighter sky. The forest floor is covered in large, rounded rocks or boulders, many of which are heavily covered in moss or lichen, giving them a textured, almost sculptural appearance. The overall atmosphere is quiet and ancient.

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# Cavell and Literature

## EDITORIAL COMMENT

Welcome to the fourth issue of *Conversations*, which explores Cavell's philosophic interest in literature, an oft-repeated and rehashed thematic prism and vantage point from which to address Cavell's work. However, it is our feeling that, at times anyhow, Cavell's interest in Wittgenstein and film dwarfs slightly his literary interests. We are constantly reminded, of course, of Cavell's last line in *The Claim of Reason*, expressed as "can philosophy become literature and still know itself?" This issue seeks to reverse the gradient of thinking somewhat to ask something like: "Can literature become philosophy, or philosophical, and still know itself?" Whatever pressure philosophy faces to respect, say, formal parameters of argumentation, does anyone yet conceive of literature facing similar professional pressure from the *opposite* direction? What sort of formal parameters ought literary study to respect, if any? Is this a plea for philosophy? Does Cavell count *here*?

We open with Bernhard Stricker, who, briefly discussing Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, asks if the flood of memories released by the protagonist's famous eating of the tea-laden madeleine is indicative of experience *missed* or experience *lost*. If missed, it was certainly missed in the moment. But if subject to recall, say, through literature, or literary rendering, *when* did the narrator of Proust's novel *ever* have his experience? Is such experience always-already *lost*?

Whether or how we can ever claim something not quite lost, but, perhaps, not quite intended, is addressed by Eric Lindstrom. Focussing on Cavell's treatment of J.L. Austin's "perlocutionary" utterances (rebranded by Cavell as "passionate" ones), the literary ante is specifically raised by looking at moments of intentions "unrealized" so to speak in the works of that other famous Austen, including *Emma*. Lindstrom, himself a Jane Austen scholar, has us ponder just what Austen *intended* in articulating her protagonist's convalescence. Is there a redeeming quality to Austen's ironical portrayal of human pettiness, or is it much more a vicious attack on the sta-

tus quo—as vicious, say, as any Nietzschean Romantic grandstanding, however muted?

Perlocution is further explored by David Kaufmann, though he makes it a point to conflate the illocutionary (conventional) operation of utterances with their perlocutionary force. Rather than looking at them as separate speech acts, Kaufmann reminds us that Austin’s ultimate agenda was to describe *the* ultimate speech act, however much we may benefit, in the early going, from separating illocutionary conditions from perlocutionary effects. Austin may not have explored perlocutionary utterances as much as “literary” people may have liked; Kaufmann, however, “aims to [drag] the literary back to pragmatics, aesthetics and everyday ethics” via a discussion of perlocutions.

But the elephant in the room may be whether or not one can theorize a complete speech act, with full illocutionary and perlocutionary affect brought to bear. Indeed, the quest for such totalizing knowledge (the “pure” statement”), the desire to comment on language from a position of everywhere and nowhere, raises the issue of whether or not philosophy’s claim on literature is *monstrous*. Can pragmatic and aesthetic concerns be explored simultaneously, or, in line with some critical “uncertainty” principle, does our ability to comment on one necessarily negate the other? Is the drive to establish pragmatics and aesthetics in its totality a hubristic enterprise? This is a way, perhaps, of characterizing the desire *to want to* unify Anglo-analytical and Continental dispositions of professional philosophy.

Allying himself resolutely with the Anglo-analytical tradition, Bruce Krajewski notes more than a hint of elitism in Cavell’s writing—the “esoteric” and oftentimes impenetrable characteristics of which are borrowed from other notable esotericists: Heidegger and Nietzsche. Some obviously balk at Cavell’s attempt to bring such notorious Continental influences into the mainstream of American philosophical currents. But Cavell has been largely *unsuccessful* in this regard. Krajewski’s essay reminds us perhaps *why* Cavell remains “strange” to the institutionalized American philosophy—not, that is, because he is unknowingly overlooked, but rather, *knowingly* repressed, say, for philosophy’s own good.

After much heady philosophical consideration of language and its sequent affects comes a warm and charming anecdote of “educational” intimacy, as Darko

Štrajn lets his mind wander to formulate a proper acknowledgment and appreciation of a fortuitous run-in with Stanley Cavell.

Lastly, Sam Cardoen formulates a Cavellian acknowledgement and response of his own, this time to Cavell's essay, "Knowing and Acknowledging" and his reading of *Endgame*. Cardoen cleverly notes that Hamm's negation of his own existence is a simultaneous expression of solidarity with all those now deceased—hence life negating and life affirming (solidarity) at the same time. This takes us back, perhaps, to the responsibility of all those who, upon uttering language, are faced with life or death. It remains up to all of us to choose life. Human desires may be abstruse, but we cannot renege on intelligibility, which means that literature and philosophy, aesthetics and pragmatics, must not lose sight of each other.

With all best wishes,

SÉRGIO AND AMIR

# Experience Missed or Lost?: Cavell's Concept of the Ordinary and Walter Benjamin on the "Loss of Aura"

BERNHARD STRICKER

I sometimes speak of [...] discovering the extraordinary in what we call ordinary and discovering the ordinary in what we call extraordinary; sometimes as detecting significance in the insignificant, sometimes as detecting insignificance in the significant.

CAVELL, "Companionable Thinking"

[...] we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.

WALTER BENJAMIN, "Surrealism"

The notion of the ordinary or everyday is of seminal importance in Cavell's readings of literature.<sup>1</sup> The transcendental and anthropological dimensions of skepticism and the ordinary, however, may sometimes appear to be treated by him in an essentially ahistorical manner. But the discovery of the ordinary, which is always a re-discovery, can also be shown to be deeply embedded in Cavell's treatment of modernism in the arts. The present essay therefore proposes that we can deepen our understanding of the ordinary by relating it to Walter Benjamin's ideas about the "loss of aura," which he develops with regard to Baudelaire, Proust and film, most famously in his essays

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1. The notion of the ordinary is particularly important in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988); see also Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 115-162.

about “The Artwork in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility” and on “Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” Cavell’s and Benjamin’s common aesthetic interests can of course be regarded as the expression of very different concerns: Whereas Cavell is then considered to be primarily interested in epistemological issues, Benjamin will be seen as defending, sometimes radically, a historical-materialist view of art. In spite of these differences in outlook, however, Cavell and Benjamin attempt to address a very similar question, namely how to conceive of significance as neither having its source in transcendence nor as being reducible to a mere given in the positivistic sense. In this sense, both the notion of the ordinary and the concept of the “loss of aura” are responsive to the particular historical conditions of modernity.

There is an ambiguity in the notion of “aura” that aligns it with and simultaneously distinguishes it from the ordinary: The interplay of closeness and distance in Benjamin’s definition of “aura” as “the unique appearance of a distance, however near it may be”<sup>2</sup> approximates Wittgenstein’s characterization of the ordinary in the following terms: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it’s always before one’s eyes.)”<sup>3</sup> That a dialectic of nearness and distance is at work not only in each of these two concepts taken by themselves but also in the relationship between Benjamin and Wittgenstein more generally is what Cavell draws attention to when he says: “[...] Benjamin’s anti- or counterphilosophy may be seen specifically as immeasurably distant from and close to Wittgenstein’s anti- or counterphilosophy in *Philosophical Investigations* [...]”<sup>4</sup> In “The Artwork in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” however, Benjamin seems to conceive of auratic experience as definitively a thing of the past, which is not the case for the ordinary in Wittgenstein’s and Cavell’s sense. Still, it is a significant aspect of the ordinary that it is never simply present as such, but is constantly missed. It is precisely its unobtrusiveness, its elusive character that constitutes the ordinary as a place where we have always already been without having yet or ever really arrived there.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a notion of

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2. Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 518.

3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43e, § 129.

4. Cavell, “Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities,” in *Critical Inquiry* 25.2 (Winter 1999), 236.

5. Cavell calls the ordinary “a place we have never been”; Cavell, “Something Out of the Ordinary,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 9-10.

experience as something that is either essentially bound to be missed or is not possible at all any more in the modern age unites Cavell's and Benjamin's accounts of the nature and importance of art. The comparison between their attitudes toward the status of experience is therefore an approach to the concept of the ordinary that shows it to be crucial to an understanding of the relation between art and the modern world.

### **Cavell's Transcendental Criticism and the Idea of the Ordinary**

The notion of the "ordinary" as included in the term "ordinary language philosophy" was originally used to contrast with concepts such as "logic," "philosophy" or "metaphysics." Repeatedly, Cavell quotes and comments on Wittgenstein's description of his philosophical procedures in the *Philosophical Investigations* that says: "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."<sup>6</sup> Cavell thus remained faithful not only to the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, but to the term as well, giving the idea of the "ordinary" or the "everyday" more weight than Austin or even Wittgenstein did. His discovery of what he calls the "underwriting of ordinary language philosophy" by the American transcendentalists,<sup>7</sup> especially Emerson's emphasis on "the common, [...] the familiar, the low,"<sup>8</sup> was certainly of great importance in this respect. In consequence, further aspects of the idea of the ordinary become increasingly more significant. One of these aspects is its inconspicuousness, the unobtrusive closeness that Wittgenstein highlights in saying: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity."<sup>9</sup> In various ways, the things that easily go unnoticed for being so close have played an important role in Cavell's thought from the beginning. Consider, for example, the idea that the data which provide the foundation of his interpretation of

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6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 3rd edn. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 41e, § 116.

7. Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation. (Politics as opposed to what?)," in *Themes out of School. Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 51.

8. "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low"; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (London: Penguin, 2003), 102.

9. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 43e, § 129.

*King Lear* are all obvious, and his attempt to account for the fact that these aspects of the play could have been missed by all readers but himself.<sup>10</sup> Or think of the issue of “presentness” that comes up both in the *Lear* essay and in *The World Viewed*.<sup>11</sup> In these passages, it sometimes seems as though we let ourselves continuously be distracted. Yet, in other moments, this condition appears less as a self-inflicted state than as an aspect of the ordinary itself in its elusiveness. This ambiguity is obvious in the first pages of Cavell’s autobiography, *Little did I know*, in a short passage in which he draws, in a rather offhand way, a picture of the human condition:

[...] whatever happens – whatever is eventful enough for speech – is from the beginning accidental, as if human life is *inherently interrupted*, things chronically occurring at unripe times, in the wrong tempo, comically or poignantly. [...] What that now means to me is that *we chronically interrupt ourselves* – say, we fail to give the right quality or quantity of time to our thoughts or deeds, say, let them climax. [...] But chronic interruption means the perpetual incompleteness of human expression [...].<sup>12</sup>

In these sentences, human existence appears as a life-form that is not naturally synchronized with its experience. We can understand Cavell’s autobiography, of course, as an attempt to give voice to a part of his own life that has remained expressionless in this way. In “Something out of the Ordinary,” Cavell makes explicit that an essential constituent of the ordinary is that it always slips out of our grasp: “the ordinary as what is missable.”<sup>13</sup> Shortly after, Cavell establishes a connection between what he calls the “fact or fantasy of an experience missed” and the concept of criticism:

I have rather assumed, more or less without argument [...], that Kant’s location of the aesthetic judgment, as claiming to record the presence of pleasure

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10. Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love. A Reading of *King Lear*,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 272; cf. *ibid.*, 310: “It is the difficulty of seeing the obvious, something which for some reason is always underestimated.”

11. *Ibid.*, 322; Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 108-126.

12. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 30; emphasis added.

13. Cavell, “Something out of the Ordinary,” 11.

without a concept, makes room for a particular form of criticism, one capable of supplying the concepts which, after the fact of pleasure, articulate the grounds of this experience in particular objects. The work of such criticism is to reveal its object as having yet to achieve its due effect. Something there, despite being fully opened to the senses, has been missed.<sup>14</sup>

In “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” Cavell has already drawn on Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* in his attempt to characterize the ambiguous nature of the ordinary language philosopher’s claim to determine “what we should say when,” which is neither a merely empirical nor a purely transcendental judgment.<sup>15</sup> Now, while referring to his earlier essay, Cavell tries to articulate the presuppositions of his practice of literary criticism (and art criticism in general) by transforming and enlarging once more Kant’s understanding of aesthetic judgment. Kant does not attribute any conceptual content to the aesthetic judgment but distinguishes clearly between the aesthetic and the cognitive mode of judgment.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to that, Cavell thinks that criticism is able to provide the concepts for an understanding of an aesthetic experience retrospectively. Consequently, the task of the critic is not to subsume an object under certain concepts, but to explain how and why at the time of the experience we lacked the necessary conceptual outfit to fully grasp what we perceived, i.e., why we *had* to miss something that was still somehow there. Works of art allow us to have this experience of an experience missed in an exemplary way. That an experience can be revealed in this belated fashion—in an *essentially* retrospective way—as richer than we were able to realize while it was present, shows us that there is an aesthetic surplus in our experience, which makes our experiences in hindsight more comprehensive than our possibilities of simultaneous perception. This excess of meaning can eventually guarantee the existence of something independent from my consciousness and my conceptual patterns of recognition. Thus, aesthetic experience paradoxically becomes a touchstone of the real, or of the existence of the world.

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14. Cavell, “Something out of the Ordinary,” 11.

15. Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 86-96.

16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), 45-46 (§ 6).

Criticism, then, determines the features of its objects not by recognition, but by letting the object in question itself teach us the mode of its experience. Cavell stresses this responsiveness to the artwork's own modeling of its conditions of reception as a decisive aspect of his approach to literature.<sup>17</sup> In its responsiveness to the work of art, criticism turns into a criticism of the object and our experience of the object at the same time. Thus, it allows us to leave behind our "constructions" or "schematizations" of experience, whether of the empiricist ("All experience is based on sense data") or of the rationalistic type ("All experience is based on *a priori* forms of knowledge"). In doing so, art teaches us about what Cavell, in a paradoxical twist of Kantian terms, calls "the autonomy of the object."<sup>18</sup> In attributing "self-government" to reason alone, Kant rendered it almost impossible to think of ourselves as truly receptive to something outside of ourselves. The ensuing post-Kantian skepticism is perceived as a problem and reacted against in the texts of Wordsworth, Coleridge and the transcendentalists that Cavell dedicates himself to in *In Quest of the Ordinary*.<sup>19</sup> A criticism that tries to show in each case that its object does not *presuppose* the conditions of its being experienced but *creates* them, deserves to be called "transcendental criticism." What is at stake in this kind of criticism is made explicit by Cavell when he speaks of the

[...] connection between the arrogation of the right to speak for others about the language we share *and* about works of art we cannot bear not to share. [...] It is a condition of, or threat to, that relation to things called aesthetic, that something I know and cannot make intelligible stands to be lost to me.<sup>20</sup>

When I am not able to share the experience of an artwork, I eventually cannot even be sure of what I experienced myself and I am therefore liable to have to give up on what I took to be a significant part of reality. That our experience of art is threatened if we are unable to share it with someone may at first glance seem to invite the comparison with the skeptic's picture of privacy as an essential incapacity to communi-

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17. David Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 7.

18. Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," 116.

19. Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant. (Terms as Conditions)," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 29ff.

20. Cavell, "Something Out of the Ordinary," 9.

cate or share our experience. But the experience of art, far from being necessarily private, rather calls for the creation of a community in which the experience *could* be shared and it must be understood as itself an attempt at extending the boundaries of our common, shared world.

### From Involuntary Memory to the Loss of Aura

The theme of a missed experience and its recovery is probably nowhere more prominent than in Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time* that Cavell repeatedly refers to in his autobiography.<sup>21</sup> In the novel's most famous passage the protagonist tastes a *madeleine*, a small cake dipped in lime blossom tea, that suddenly makes him re-experience parts of his childhood that had formerly been out of reach of his conscious memory.<sup>22</sup> In early childhood, as he now remembers, he used to eat such a piece of cake when he went to visit his aunt Leonie. After the first forty pages of the novel that contain the narrator's dim conscious childhood memories, the aesthetic experience of the cake opens up a completely new dimension of memory and triggers a rush of childhood images that fills the bulk of the novel's first volume. It is important to notice that this special dimension of memory, called involuntary memory, does not re-vive experiences the way we consciously lived through them in the past, it rather opens up a completely new dimension of our experience that we missed at the time when the events remembered originally took place. Walter Benjamin emphasizes this aspect of involuntary memory in saying:

[...] only what has not been experienced explicitly and consciously, what has not happened to the subject as an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], can become a component of *mémoire involontaire*.<sup>23</sup>

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21. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 28, 31, 386, 533. For a more elaborate account of the connection between Proust and Cavell see Bernhard Stricker, "L'intérêt de la lecture'—lesen und gelesen werden. (Proust, Thoreau, de Man, Cavell)," in *Proust-Lektüren*, ed. Peter Brandes (Hamburg: Dr. Kovač, 2014), 17-66.

22. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 4 vols., ed. Jean-Yves Tadié et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-1989), vol. 1, 43-47.

23. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), vol. 4, 1938-1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 317.

We can regard *In Search of Lost Time* as a study of the ordinary: The narrator unfolds before us in minute detail the train of everyday events and their recurrences over the span of nearly a lifetime. One of the novel's first reviewers complained about the discrepancy between the trivial nature of the recorded action and the amount of time spent in telling it.<sup>24</sup> But the importance of the ordinary is also registered in the novel's abundant use of what Gérard Genette has called the "iterative mode" of storytelling, i.e., the mode that is used to narrate events that occur repeatedly or on a regular basis, in sentences such as "Every Sunday, we went to church."<sup>25</sup> For Walter Benjamin, the self-estrangement that lies at the foundation of our involuntary memory is due to the de-subjectifying aspects of modern everyday life. As a result, it is a question of chance whether we will be able to take possession of our experience and achieve self-knowledge:

According to Proust, it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience. But there is nothing inevitable about the dependence on chance in this matter. A person's concerns are not by nature of an *inescapably private character*. They attain this character only after the likelihood decreases that one's external concerns will be assimilated to one's experience.<sup>26</sup>

That our experience becomes incommunicable since it can no longer be assimilated and integrated into the fabric of our lives or rendered in a story-telling mode is particularly emphasized in Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller."<sup>27</sup> But his remark has to be understood in the context of his ideas on the loss of the "auratic" structure of experience which he elaborates in a number of writings from the 1930s. According to his concept of "aura," in a modern society determined by capitalist industrialism, urbanism and mass media there is no room for the individual to have any authentic, significant

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24. See the "rapport de lecture" by Jacques Madeleine (pseudonym of the poet Jacques Normand) in Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann. À la recherche du temps perdu I*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 446-450.

25. Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit. Essai de méthode* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), 111-127.

26. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 315; emphasis added.

27. Benjamin, "The Storyteller. Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, 143-166.

experience. Three aspects of modern society prove to be particularly resistant to the assimilation of experience: (1) the isolation of informative content in the newspapers, the only virtue of which consists in its novelty; (2) the dull and repetitive character of work in the factories that consists in a constant repetition of the same routines; and (3) the acceleration of urban traffic and the resulting changes in the structure of perception, such as a perpetually heightened consciousness that is necessary in order to react to the impulses from the streets.<sup>28</sup> As a result, it is impossible for individuals to incorporate their experiences and they are at the mercy of a discontinuous chain of “inescapably private” sensations.

### **Cavell and Benjamin on Baudelaire and Film**

There is an easily recognizable parallel between the incommunicability that Benjamin finds so disturbing about the “sensational” character of modern life and Cavell’s worry over the individual’s isolation that is a result of skepticism. This parallel appears all the more striking in face of the fact that Cavell is primarily concerned with epistemological issues whereas Benjamin’s is essentially a historical-materialist perspective.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Cavell sees skepticism as a recurring condition that defines the modern era since Descartes, while Benjamin regards the loss of authentic experience mainly as a result of socio-economic developments that occur during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> These distinguishing features render the affinities between the two thinkers in their respective

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28. All these factors play an important part in Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” as well as in the famous “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 101-133. There are three, slightly differing versions of Benjamin’s famous article of which we generally quote the second version, which the author himself intended to have published. On the loss of aura see also: Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin. A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 147-152. I follow Friedlander in applying the term “aura” not only to the experience of artworks, but to the structure of significant experience in general (262, n. 5); cf. Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008), 4.

29. The importance of this difference in outlook must not be underrated but will not be our primary concern in this paper.

30. Giorgio Agamben, in enlarging Benjamin’s argument in *Infancy and History*, has shown the problem of the loss of aura to be related to modern science from its very beginning in the 16th century: Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History. The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 11-63. Eva Geulen has very convincingly argued that Benjamin’s identification of aura is a performative gesture which depends on the prior loss of the auratic structure of experience: “[...] the aura, ephemeral and altogether immaterial, is less a concept than a performative intervention. The theory of aura developed in sections 2 through 4 undoubtedly unfolds under the

treatment of Baudelaire, film and modern art even more important. Both Cavell and Benjamin think that the cinema can still take the audience's interest for granted at a moment in history when all the other arts are marked by a gap between pleasure and what Benjamin calls the "attitude of expert appraisal."<sup>31</sup> Benjamin explains this by referring to changes in the structure of perception: the speed of a sequence of moving pictures corresponds to the structure of perception of a citizen who is used to react to the shocks and impulses from urban traffic. The sensational effect of these impressions is due only to their novelty and is lost at the exact moment they reach the level of consciousness. Therefore, they leave no traces in memory.

*Film is the art form corresponding to the pronounced threat to life in which people live today. It corresponds to profound changes in the apparatus of perception—changes that are experienced on the scale of private existence by each passerby in big-city traffic, and on the scale of world history by each fighter against the present social order.*<sup>32</sup>

The same habits that make us turn to movies render the reading of poetry a much harder task than it used to be in former ages, since poetry usually relies on the reader's ability to concentrate. Baudelaire, however, as Benjamin tells us, was the first poet to take into account the difficulties that a modern reader of poetry has to face:

Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. [...] Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points. What they prefer is sensual pleasure; they are familiar with the "spleen" which kills interest and receptiveness.<sup>33</sup>

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rubric of the last sentence of section I. Nothing is more revealing for the analysis of modern technologies of reproduction, Benjamin writes, 'than the way in which the two manifestations – reproduction of the artwork and cinematic art – retroactively effect art in its received form' [...]. More exactly: aura can only be described retrospectively, for the knowledge that the essence of art has up until now been constituted in the aura can only appear once it has lost this character. Thus aura as aura arises only in its loss"; Eva Geulen, *The End of Art. Readings in a Rumor after Hegel*, transl. James McFarland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 84.

31. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 116.

32. *Ibid.*, 132, n. 33.

33. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 313.

Cavell sees a very similar connection between Baudelaire's depiction of modern urban life and the invention of film. In *The World Viewed* he draws on Baudelaire's famous text *The Painter of Modern Life* for his explanations on the origin of cinema. Astonishingly, he claims that Baudelaire anticipated the cinema in what Cavell calls a "prophetic hallucination."<sup>34</sup> The occasion for this unlikely assertion is another instance of a missed experience: How is it possible, Cavell wonders, that Baudelaire took only a very casual interest in what we would regard as the most important painters of his day, Courbet and Manet? Yet, at the same time, he dedicated his manifesto of modernism, *The Painter of Modern Life*, to the comparably insignificant painter Constantin Guys? According to Cavell, Baudelaire saw in Guys's drawings something more (than what they are), i.e., a hint at the possible fulfillment of his anticipatory wish for motion pictures:

Out of his despair of happiness, out of his disgust with its official made-up substitutes, and out of his knowledge of his isolation and estrangement from the present and the foreignness of the past [...], he found the wish for photography, in particular for motion pictures—the wish for that specific simultaneity of presence and absence which only the cinema will satisfy.<sup>35</sup>

Cavell's and Benjamin's diagnoses could not possibly be more fully in accord. According to them, Baudelaire perceived the sensations that life in the urban surroundings of his time provided as faked, as having lost the character of truly significant experience. In his poetry, he tried, therefore, to expose the illusory character of life in a world of things that are devoid of any intrinsic history or value since they have taken on the commodity form. Benjamin shows that allegory is the crucial rhetorical device that Baudelaire employs to this purpose.<sup>36</sup> Cavell is more interested, however, in the connection between Baudelaire's perception of his urban environment and the possibilities of the medium of film:

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34. For the following see: Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 41-46; for Baudelaire's text see Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-1976), vol. 2, 683-724.

35. *Ibid.*, 42. That Baudelaire did not appreciate the new technology of photography is taken into account by Cavell; *ibid.*, 42: "Photographs did not look like photographs to him; they looked like *imitation paintings* [...]."

36. *Ibid.*, 43-44.

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. [...] When Baudelaire speaks of "the pleasure that the artistic eye obtains ... from the series of geometrical figures that the object in question ... successively and rapidly creates in space," he is not describing anything a draftsman showed him; he is having a prophetic hallucination.<sup>37</sup>

Cavell finds a connection between Baudelaire's appreciation of Guys's drawings and film in the former's description of the way in which movement is captured by the draughtsman's pencil. Whereas drawings can record movement only in an approximate fashion, motion pictures made it a natural constituent of their own medium. Thus, they are much better suited to the task of capturing the ephemeral, fleeting appearances of everyday life in the city. Capturing these fugitive moments constitutes an essential part of the modern manifestation of beauty for Baudelaire. What fascinates him in fashion and cosmetics is as much their changing appearance as it is the artificiality of the human life-form itself, i.e., that the human mode of existence *must* manifest itself, not necessarily in this or that particular type of fashion, but in some contingent way of dressing, moving, behaving, etc.

In praising Cosmetics, he refers not merely to make-up, but also to fashion generally and beyond that to the artifices necessary to civilized life as a whole: its streets, parks, buildings, furnishings, commodities—the secretions and scaffoldings of our forms of life.<sup>38</sup>

These ordinary circumstances of human life that are unobtrusive but typical in their particular appearance for a certain historical time and age are what Baudelaire is interested in when he praises Guys. In the guise of the draughtsman, Baudelaire pays his homage to the ordinary.

In comparing the cinema to Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Benjamin equally observes film's particular capacity for the visualization of the ordinary:

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37. For the passage Cavell quotes see Baudelaire, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, 724.

38. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 44.

Since the publication of *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life), things have changed. This book isolated and made analyzable things which had previously floated unnoticed on the broad stream of perception. A similar deepening of apperception throughout the entire spectrum of optical—and now also auditory—impressions has been accomplished by film. [...] Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, Cavell and Benjamin essentially agree on the way in which film allows the ordinary to become visible. If Cavell regards Baudelaire as anticipating the cinema, Benjamin sees a quite similar prefiguration of cinema in the aesthetic shock principle of the Dadaists.<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, however, emphasizes the fact that the discontinuous stream of images makes film the natural prolongation of the modern citizen's habits of perception, whereas Cavell is more interested in the relation of the movies to the world they project and to their cinematic audience. He attributes a "magic character" to the peculiar mode in which the cinema reproduces the world. This magical character is due to the automatism of film, the way in which the appearance of the world is wholly accounted for by the technical mechanism of the cinematic projection, because it renders the viewers' acknowledgment of the world's appearance superfluous. The viewers can indulge in their invisibility in a way that makes their anonymous and private condition appear completely natural.

How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. This is not a wish for power over creation (as Pygmalion's was), but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens. [...] In viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an ex-

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39. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 265. Eli Friedlander highlights the connection of the ordinary and film in Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 171-180.

40. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 118-119.

pression of modern privacy or anonymity. It is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed as at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition.<sup>41</sup>

In making anonymity and privacy a condition for the viewing of films, the auditorium in a cinema provides a habitat of modern citizens and relieves them temporarily of the burden of responsibility for their own isolation. In this respect, Cavell stresses the way in which viewing a film differs from our lives outside the cinema, whereas Benjamin sees a continuity between our everyday modes of perception and the discontinuous stream of images that we watch on screen.

### Media and Modernism

But isn't Cavell's idea of Baudelaire having anticipated the cinema completely incongruous, if we consider the fact that the technical preconditions for the possible realization of film were not even given at the time of Baudelaire's writing? Cavell's assertion that Baudelaire's wish was able to anticipate the possibilities of film may seem to idealize and overly simplify the complex history of technological progress. His intention, however, is to counterbalance the opposite oversimplification that identifies the origin of the cinema with the availability of the technical prerequisites for its realization. Cavell emphasizes that we must understand the cinema as corresponding to and satisfying a human wish or desire.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the invention of film is

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41. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 40-41.

42. *Ibid.*, 38ff. For this fundamental idea and many more besides Cavell is indebted to André Bazin to whom he refers numerous times in *The World Viewed*: "The way things happened seems to call for a reversal of the historical order of causality, which goes from the economic infrastructure to the ideological superstructure, and for us to consider the basic technical discoveries as fortunate accidents but essentially second in importance to the preconceived ideas of the inventors. The cinema is an idealistic phenomenon. The concept men had of it existed so to speak fully armed in their minds, as if in some platonic heaven, and what strikes us most of all is the obstinate resistance of matter to ideas rather than of any help offered by techniques to the imagination of the researchers"; André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in André Bazin, *What is cinema?*, select. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1967), 17.

essentially more than just a matter of technological progress. Rather, a possibility provided by a technological innovation can be grasped *as* a possibility only by the specific application that is given to its technical or material basis. This idea is fundamental in Cavell's history of the cinema (or of the modern arts in general) and it finds expression in his deliberately ambiguous use of the term "medium" to denote both the material basis of an art and the forms or genres realized by the paradigmatic instances of that art.<sup>43</sup> An artistic medium is the realization of a particular possibility of its physical elements that can be understood as such a possibility only in retrospect. Yet, it has to be regarded as having already been present, slumbering so to say, in the material basis. Therefore, an artistic medium is never simply deducible from its material components.

In Cavell's reflections on media, we can detect more than a slight resemblance to his conception of criticism, and this is hardly surprising, since the idea of art as internalizing its own criticism is part of the romantic legacy inherited by Cavell.<sup>44</sup> In its material basis a medium renders discernible a possibility that one can grasp as such only in hindsight but that has to be understood as having been present already before its discovery. In a similar manner, criticism discovers a significant aspect of an experience that remained hidden in the presence of the event but has to be regarded as already there when it is discerned in retrospect. We can thus understand Cavell's transcendental criticism as the complement to an art the development of which consists essentially in the invention of new media or "automatisms."<sup>45</sup> This is the case with modern art that cannot simply rely on its tradition as something given, but has to reestablish the connection with its past and its present in order to compel us to acknowledge its continued existence.<sup>46</sup>

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43. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 105.

44. This is meant by the famous notion of "Transzendentalpoesie" (transcendental poetry) coined by the German romantic critic Friedrich Schlegel and referred to by Cavell on several occasions, for example in Cavell, "Macbeth Appalled," in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edn., (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 232 and Cavell, "The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 30ff.

45. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 104.

46. That artworks are no longer perceived as naturally embedded in a tradition is one of the crucial aspects of the loss of aura: "The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition." Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," 256. On the importance of tradition for the notion of aura cf. Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 148; Geulen, *The End of Art*, 88.

Modernism signifies not that the powers of the arts are exhausted, but on the contrary that it has become the immediate task of the artist to achieve in his art the muse of the art itself—to declare, from itself, the art as a whole for which it speaks, to become a present of that art. One might say that the task is no longer to produce another instance of an art but a new medium within it. [...] It follows that in such a predicament, media are not given *a priori*.<sup>47</sup>

Whereas the cinema is naturally related to its tradition without having to establish this connection in an effort to keep the art of film itself alive,<sup>48</sup> modernism compels the other arts to a logic that is sometimes characterized as a perpetual strive for originality so as to surpass all earlier attempts.<sup>49</sup> However, originality is not to be confounded with novelty: In order to achieve true originality, the creation of a new medium has to be an expression of faithfulness to an artistic tradition that can be continued in no other way than by a break with the predefined conventions. Cavell calls this

[...] the modernist predicament in which an art has lost its natural relation to its history, in which an artist, exactly because he is devoted to making an object that will bear the same weight of experience that such objects have always borne which constitute the history of his art, is compelled to find unheard-of structures that define themselves and their history against one another. [...] When in such a state an art explores its medium, it is exploring the conditions of its existence; it is asking exactly whether, and under what conditions, it can survive.<sup>50</sup>

In creating a new medium within an art, the artist acknowledges his indebtedness to the tradition that influenced him. In challenging the preexistent conventions of his art, the artist is thus not trying to forgo conventionality as such, but acknowledging and reaffirming its true depth.

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47. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 103.

48. With regard their respective historical situation, it makes much more sense to speak of a cinematic “tradition” in Cavell’s case, of course, than in Benjamin’s.

49. See, for instance Peter Gay on the “lure of heresy” in *Modernism. The Lure of Heresy. From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (London: Vintage, 2009), 3ff.

50. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 72.

In the light of this “modern predicament” of the arts, film’s ability to capture the ordinary can be seen as a different way of expressing its natural relation to tradition. If the movies can present the ordinary on screen, they can do so because of the audience’s particular presence-in-absence. If the ordinary can normally only be experienced as absent in our presence, then film allows the ordinary to appear because the automatism causes us to be absent from whatever is happening in the projected world. For the other arts, the necessity to affirm their existence by the production of new media goes along with the retrospective character of their experience that is typical of the ordinary also. Modernism according to Cavell’s notion of it is characterized, then, by an asynchrony in the experience of the present. Modernism defines itself as modern not because of its being in the present, but because of a particular relation to time in which presence, i.e., being related to one’s time and to the past, has become a task, something to be achieved, instead of a natural part of our condition.<sup>51</sup>

### Experience, Language and the Arts

A further inflection that Cavell gives to the idea of the modern as characterized by the task of acknowledging our relatedness to the present, i.e., our existence, is expressed in his saying: “Art now exists in the condition of philosophy.”<sup>52</sup> The condition of philosophy is epitomized by Descartes for whom the world and myself are no longer simply there, to be taken for granted. Cavell reads Descartes not as trying to prove his own existence once and for all, but as affirming that existence has to be accepted by thinking it through, by going back over it again, acknowledging it.<sup>53</sup> Benjamin also characterizes the reaction of the arts to the modern loss of aura by a reference to Descartes and modern science, when he says:

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51. Michel Foucault finds this attitude characteristically expressed in Baudelaire’s *Le peintre de la vie moderne* in “What is Enlightenment?,” trans. C. Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, eds. Paul Rabinow et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 38.

52. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 14.

53. Cavell, “Hamlet’s Burden of Proof,” in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 187: “In philosophy I take it to have been expressed in Descartes’s *Cogito* argument, a point perfectly understood and deeply elaborated by Emerson, that to exist the human being has the burden of proving that he or she exists, and that this burden is discharged in *thinking* your existence, which comes in Descartes (though this is controversial) to finding how to say ‘I am, I exist’; not of course to say it just once, but at every instant of your existence, originate it.”

For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start [...]. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa. They need a drawing table; they were constructors. Such a constructor was Descartes, who required nothing more to launch his entire philosophy than the single certitude “I think, therefore I am.” And he went on from there. [...] And this same insistence on starting from the very beginning also marks artists when they followed the example of mathematicians and built the world from stereometric forms, like the Cubists, or modelled themselves on engineers, like Klee.<sup>54</sup>

Benjamin distinguishes the originality of the arts from the mere novelty of sensations and the industrial products of capitalist mass production by an analogy with scientific innovation. Cavell employs the same analogy when he compares the invention of an artistic medium to Thomas Kuhn’s idea of a paradigm shift, thus emphasizing that a break with a tradition or convention can result from conservative motives.<sup>55</sup> Benjamin and Cavell are united in their protest against the sort of pre-determined conceptualization of experience that is most clearly exemplified by logic and mathematics taken as rigid frameworks and as measures of all possible experience. The experience of the ordinary as something essentially past, unremarkable in the present, becomes the foundation for Cavell’s critical remonstrance against scientism and a view of experience that exclusively allows what is present and conceptually determinable to enter into consideration. In *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, he repeatedly refers to Quine’s conceptualization of experience as a “check-point” of the validity of scientific theories:

What is at stake is, even before the idea of knowledge, the sense of how human experience is to be called to account. The classical empiricist’s idea of impressions as the origin, or cause, of ideas, like Quine’s “check-points of experience” in the service of theory-building, stylizes experience.<sup>56</sup>

Whereas Cavell developed his ordinary language philosophy primarily against the background of positivist traditions in philosophy, Benjamin in an early essay on “The

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54. Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 733.

55. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 238 (footnote no. 38).

56. Cavell, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 2.

Program of the Coming Philosophy” takes a critical stance towards Neo-Kantianism that shows significant parallels to ordinary language concerns. The idea adopted from Hamann that Kant’s scientific orientation prevented him from seeing the decisive role of language in the structuring of experience is the central point in his essay:

Just as Kantian theory itself, in order to find its principles, needed to be confronted with a science with reference to which it could define them, modern philosophy will need this as well. The great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the concept of experience, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained only by relating knowledge to language [...]. For Kant, the consciousness that philosophical knowledge was absolutely certain and a priori, the consciousness of that aspect of philosophy in which it is fully the peer of mathematics, ensured that he devoted almost no attention to the fact that all philosophical knowledge has its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers. A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize.<sup>57</sup>

Benjamin’s idea of redefining the nature of experience by showing the ways in which it is informed by language is more than an anticipation of ordinary language philosophy, of course. The idea is indebted to a tradition that Cavell has most usefully explored in the American transcendentalists. In commenting on Emerson, Cavell makes explicit the idea that not only the twelve categories of the understanding, but language as a whole is in need of a transcendental deduction:

It is as if in Emerson’s writing [...] Kant’s pride in what he called his Copernican Revolution for philosophy, understanding the behavior of the world by understanding the behavior of our concepts of the world, is to be radicalized, so that not just twelve categories of the understanding are to be deduced, but every word in the language [...].<sup>58</sup>

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57. Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 107-108.

58. Cavell, “Emerson, Coleridge, Kant,” 38.

The insight that such a deduction of language cannot be achieved once and for all is fully worked out in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Cavell's writing is informed by it from the start. Therefore, Cavell's conception of the ordinary sketches our modern situation as being in a recurrent need to return to the ordinary from our flights into metaphysical emptiness or self-delusion. The ordinary is something we may perpetually miss, but Cavell does not wonder whether it could ever become completely lost to us. In this respect, we can regard Cavell's notion of the ordinary as a "diurnalization," so to say, of what Benjamin works out primarily as a historical diagnosis and conceives of as an epochal condition with regard to the technological means of mechanical reproducibility and industrial mass production.

Cavell's stance on skepticism and Benjamin's attitude towards the technologies of mechanical reproduction resemble each other in the way in which both tend to be ambivalent about whether to indulge in a nostalgic regret about the loss of aura and to mourn the presence of the world or to embrace the modern condition as inevitable and as containing the essential promise of change. What is emblemized for Cavell by Thoreau's pun in the last sentence of *Walden*, "The sun is but a morning star," which takes "morning" as related to, since acoustically indistinguishable from, "mourning,"<sup>59</sup> has been regarded by many readers as a crucial ambiguity in Benjamin's attitude towards the social and technological developments that lead to the loss of auratic experience.<sup>60</sup> There is, at any rate, a decisive tension between several of Benjamin's essays on the loss of aura: Sometimes the destruction of aura by the means of technical reproducibility is considered to be a definitive and irreversible situation, whereas in different contexts, most notably in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," art is regarded as still capable of resuscitating, so to say, auratic experience.<sup>61</sup> For Cavell, the difference between a purely mechanical and an animate mode of repe-

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59. Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation," 53-54.

60. Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," 338, speaks of "Benjamin's alleged ambivalence toward aura – his being torn between the extremes of revolutionary avant-gardism and elegiac mourning for beautiful semblance [...]."

61. A more comprehensive discussion of Benjamin would have to devote more attention to the tensions that exist concerning the notions of art and aura between several of his essays. I would like to refer the reader to the major insights about Benjamin's ideas on art and aura in: Josef Fürnkäs, "Aura," in *Benjamins Begriffe*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, vol. 1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000), 95-146; Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura"; Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies / Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 13.1 (Spring 2004), 2-27; and Robert Kaufman, "Lyric Commodity Critique, Benjamin Adorno Marx, Baudelaire Baudelaire Baudelaire," *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008), 207-215.

tition in language is not a criterial distinction but the underlying condition of the human ability to make use of the criteria of language at all. The doubt whether we can really tell the one from the other, whether we can, for example, distinguish a machine like Olympia in Hoffmann's tale *The Sandman* from a human being, is precisely what is at issue in skepticism. It is no coincidence that skepticism in terms of regarding the animate as liveless and vice versa turns up in "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" in connection with another instance of "an uncanny anticipation of a movie camera," i.e., the spyglass through which the protagonist Nathanael perceives his beloved Clara as what we could call a mechanical reproduction:

The glass is a death-dealing rhetoric machine, producing or expressing the consciousness of life in one case (Olympia's) by figuration, in the other (Clara's) by literalization, or say defiguration. One might also think of it as a machine of incessant animation, the parody of a certain romantic writing; and surely not unconnectedly as an uncanny anticipation of a movie camera. The moral of the machine I would draw provisionally this way: There is a repetition necessary to what we call life, or the animate, necessary for example to the human; and a repetition necessary to what we call death, or the inanimate, necessary for example to the mechanical; and there are no marks or features or criteria or rhetoric by means of which to tell the difference between them. From which, let me simply claim, it does not follow that the difference is unknowable or undecidable. On the contrary, the difference is the basis of everything there is for human beings to know, or say decide (like deciding to live), and to decide on no basis beyond or beside or beneath ourselves.<sup>62</sup>

If, on the one hand, Cavell's outlook on art, language and experience is likely to be deemed blind to most of the socio-historical and political issues that Benjamin is concerned with, Benjamin, on the other hand, may be blamed for not taking into consideration any concrete examples of film in his theses on the effects of mechanical reproducibility. In his most widely-read book, *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell, on the contrary, brilliantly spells out his notion of the ordinary in the interpretation of indi-

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62. Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 157-158.

vidual films by taking the popular as being significantly informed by philosophical concerns. He repudiates the one-sided economic criticism of the genre of the comedy of remarriage as “fairy-tales for the depression” by directing his attention to the importance of conversation in the early Hollywood talkies.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the ordinary in language and the ordinary in film are both deployed in Cavell’s discussions of popular Hollywood comedies, salvaging the significance of language and of the aesthetic from a disparaging view of the movies as a mere industrialized entertainment.

Cavell sometimes phrases the question of how seriously we consider texts and films as candidates for challenging our preconceived notions of what is important as a matter of letting these texts or movies “have a voice.”<sup>64</sup> If we are inclined to discount the experience of Hollywood movies as mere entertainment, then we do *not* to let them have a voice in the matters that are most important to our lives. Our ability to do this will depend, however, on how far we believe that we can trust our own voice and on whether we are convinced that our voice counts at all. The repression of the voice, whether we take skepticism or capitalist economy to be its cause, is what both Benjamin and Cavell criticize as the “inescapably private character” of our experience. If art does not necessarily or directly entail the liberation of our voice, it does not simply let us indulge in an essentially private and incommunicable experience either. By confronting us with an experience that has to be missed in order to gain significance in its deferred retrieval, modern art allows us to gain insight into the forces that stifle our voice. Its contribution to the extension of the boundaries of possible experience resides in the way in which it shows our acknowledgment of and our commitment to the world as essential to its significance. Because the ordinary is never simply given, there are possibilities inherent in it that call on us as readers or spectators to realize them by giving voice to them.<sup>65</sup>

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63. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 2ff.

64. Cavell, “Something out of the Ordinary,” 10: “I mean the sort of emphasis I place on the criticism, or reading, of individual works of art. I think of this emphasis as letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it, and I regard that attention as a way of testing whether the time is past in which taking seriously the philosophical bearing of a particular work of art can be a measure of the seriousness of philosophy.”

65. Although I was not able to revise the present article extensively in the light of our discussions and cannot presume that she would agree with everything in it, I am much indebted to Aurelia Cojocar for her insightful comments on a previous version of this paper.

# Perlocution and the Rights of Desire: Cavell, Nietzsche, and Austen (and Austin)

ERIC LINDSTROM

The privileging of predication over plea, of propositional knowledge over wish, of topical language over the atypical, can be reversed neither by a violent act of knowing better nor by utopian wishes. But philological experience is recalcitrant. It shows that the desire for language cannot be restricted to the forms of knowledge. Since it is itself the advocate of this desire, it is close to the conjecture that forms of knowledge are only stations of this desire, not its structure.

WERNER HAMACHER, "Ninety-Five Theses on Philology"

There is indeed a vague and comforting idea in the background that, after all, in the last analysis, doing an action must come down to the making of physical movements with parts of the body; but that is about as true as that saying something must, in the last analysis, come down to making movements of the tongue.

J.L. AUSTIN, "A Plea for Excuses"

—Is there anything really important to you?

—I am tired of people. But it doesn't stop me from loving them.

—Nicely put.

—Yes, wasn't it.

[.....]

—One can never prevent a single human being from any kind of suffering. That's what makes one so tremendously weary.

*Smiles of a Summer's Night* (1955, dir. Ingmar Bergman)

Friedrich Nietzsche famously and mischievously begins the notorious Second Essay in *On The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) with an assertion that ties the proper breeding of mankind to the right to make promises. Nietzsche maintains: “[t]o breed an animal with the right to make promises—is this not the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man? Is this not the real problem which man not only poses but also faces?”<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche’s language challenges its reader from the start to comprehend its various possibilities of mood and mode, rhetoric and grammar: is it a bold statement of authorial values or an ironic insinuation meant to trap the bad conscience of civilized man? More simply, is it a “real” question or a rhetorical statement? The passage loses no time in deploying some of the soldiers in the army of poetical tropes that Nietzsche unmasks as the producers of truth in his equally well-known short piece, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” (here prosopopoeia: speaking for nature). Based on this small sampling, already we can sense fully how the “literary” intensity and instability of Nietzsche’s style are embedded in his very conduct of philosophy. The question marks on which the two sentences of this opening salvo end (or sort of end, as there are original ellipses “...”) may not indicate a question has been posed at all for the reader directly to answer. No question, at least, has been posed from the quasi-naïve and open premise that we tend to call a question on equal (epistemological) footing or in (sociable) “good” faith. Not a “real” question from Nietzsche, then; but all the more a real problem. A driving interrogation in fact: in light of what the next sentence calls the “countervailing” and saving “force of *forgetfulness*,” the conduct of the human will in verbal action becomes “*the* real problem” we both pose and face as linguistic beings engaged by what Stanley Cavell understands in the term moral perfectionism.<sup>2</sup>

A different Nietzsche text close in provenance, the 1886 preface to *Human, All Too Human*, occupies Cavell in the eponymous chapter of *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*. But next to the opening of the Second Essay of *On The Genealogy of Morals*, I want to adduce the chapter on “Performative and Passionate Utterance” found in Cavell’s 2005 collection. My essay will focus in particular on what Cavell terms “the

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1. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Douglas Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39, for one translation.

2. I continue to draw my language from Nietzsche’s Second Essay loosely from the Smith translation.

rights of desire”—rights stressed beyond institutional social “responsibilities of implication.”<sup>3</sup> Cavell’s recognition of the claims of desire, imaginative expression, and affective responsiveness, in contrast to J.L. Austin’s effort to minimize the scope given to perlocution in *How to Do Things with Words*, serves in this paper as a frame through which to mark (however schematically and provisionally) the various relationships of philosophy to literature, law to desire, and the once philosophically normative language of constation to a broader scope of more “poetic” or “literary” linguistic performativity. Further, as my subject here, “the rights of desire” draws attention to a compellingly peculiar specific literary argument Cavell makes in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. In the title essay, Cavell shares an extended reflection, at first “something of a shock” he admits, but ultimately, I want to show, persuasive and resonant for this occasion to think and converse upon The Literary Cavell, on the affective logic of a connective contrast between Nietzsche and Jane Austen.<sup>4</sup>

In reading Austen, Cavell singles out *Emma*. He pays attention to the heroine’s mournful thought over the continuation of her existence after the marriage of Miss Taylor to Mr. Weston at the start of *Emma*<sup>5</sup>—thus demonstrating in the very ground of Austen’s novel, and her famously entitled (“handsome, clever, and rich”) protagonist, a philosophical bafflement most readers had not really seen or heard before. And in seeking to understand the meaning of Fanny Price’s consent in terms that recall his previous writing on a film genre he calls the melodrama of the unknown woman, Cavell subsequently underscores the “economy of horror invisibly sustaining the main house of *Mansfield Park*.”<sup>6</sup> Fanny Price is at best the convalescent philosophical protagonist of a sick society awaiting its further constitution (a portrayal

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3. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 185.

4. *Ibid.*, 122.

5. *Ibid.*, 124. For an important study of another realist literary genre that draws from Cavell’s interest in the domestic world, beyond what he calls “headline moral issues,” see Toril Moi’s presentation of Ibsen’s modernism and the intolerable constrictions of gender roles on the human, in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 223-247.

6. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 127. Here one could incorporate, regarding both Emma Woodhouse and Fanny Price in their individual ways, Cavell’s discerning self-summary of his work on skepticism (the version he calls the “melodrama of the unknown woman”) in *Contesting Tears*: “This withdrawal of the world (a formulation that recurs in my various reformulations or replacements of skepticism), or this withholding of a voice before it, is an alternative understanding of [John Marcher’s character in the Henry James story “The Beast in the Jungle” that prompts his working through Eve Sedgwick’s essay “The Beast in the Closet”]; Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 191.

reinforced by the novel's canniness in turning to account Austen's, essentially the Regency's, historical positioning in between the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 and the end of British imperial slavery in the 1830s.)

In "Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow," one of Cavell's main textual coordinates in Nietzsche is from his 1886 preface to *Human, All Too Human*, which sardonically calls *Geschwätz* the topics that ought to silence the philosopher: *Geschwätz*, "chatter," or *Literatur*.<sup>7</sup> In the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche asks how we can find ourselves if we do not even seek ourselves. "We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers." If, for Cavell, Nietzsche's prose takes on the recognizable role of maximizing the expression of discontent with the world of existing, lawful, philosophical systems and social institutions, and positions literature as the properly mute—perhaps maddening, perhaps idle—antinomy to such institutions, Jane Austen occupies a position that I think most readers would not expect of her novels, in this broadly romantic dialogue about the philosophical, social, and aesthetic conditions of expressive relation. Austen provides not a foil to Nietzsche's passion (or speaking biographically, even to his threat of isolation and madness) but signals an alternate scope and key for its expression of "spiritual distress"<sup>8</sup>—something like a "piano" key of the brash philosophy of the *Übermorgen*—that substantiates the claim of desire, or least makes for its underscoring. A basic idea that I take from Cavell's interest in Austen and in what he calls, in *Contesting Tears*, the "feminine voice" is that philosophy can have a means of emphasis that does not work by just making the object or point of emphasis bolder. The sympathetic critical disposition toward such a voice articulates a place for the livable (to that extent "realist") literary mood in (his) philosophy. Nietzsche sets the task as to "breed an animal *with the right to make promises*," or who "may make promises"; and Cavell, precisely, is interested in Austen (and in George Eliot) in this chapter as writers not only of constrained, or unheroic, passions and of extracted consent, but of "good breeding."<sup>9</sup>

Cavell reads Austen's work under the movingly exigent heading of *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* as a whole, in the urgent, sobering project appropriate to his life after retirement from teaching at Harvard as well as to the remaining scope of

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7. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 116.

8. *Ibid.*, 124.

9. *Ibid.*, 119.

his life as a life. When Cavell states his principle concern as “experience of the remains of my day” in the early pages of the Introduction to *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, behind the allusion to Ishiguro’s novel of looking back on a life in dignified misspent service, one already senses that an encounter with an Austen novel must be coming soon, from just over the horizon that (due to her allegedly contained feminine realism) isn’t one.<sup>10</sup> Quite as though the belated encounter with Austen were a bigger and less easily broached topic for Cavell than the reference to Ishiguro, and later, E.M. Forster, or even his more extended history of interaction with Henry James—which I think it proves. One almost is led to ask by this tone and the foreclosed, future anterior tense: does Cavell’s constraint of time connect to Austen’s constraint of manner?

Recall that J.L. Austin’s series of lectures detailing his disagreement with the sense-data theory of knowledge carries the Austenian title, *Sense and Sensibilia*, and that Cavell thinks of the genre of the essays in the collection as “celebratory addresses”<sup>11</sup> meant to honor the occasions from which he has taken instruction, occasions from which to raise “the possibility of praise” as a mindset more worthy and more currently in need than a hermeneutics of suspicion.<sup>12</sup> So by the time of the eponymous chapter that pairs Austen with Nietzsche, we have been in a sense prepared to learn that (even) Jane Austen—not least because *Sense and Sensibilia* honors her—articulates the field under critical scrutiny and helps to form tools for a voice of expressive critique.<sup>13</sup> My association of Austen with critique may sound odd, but it is intended in a fairly rigorous way in its own terms, in the context of the linkage of Austen’s and Kant’s minimizing hence maintaining gesture of passion or knowledge. Austen’s work too exposes the conditions in response to which one intelligible option, one way to help ourselves to a future, is the fragmentation or rupture found in such

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10. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 2.

11. *Ibid.*, 1.

12. *Ibid.*, 31; also see 82. Cavell may draw here from Eve Sedgwick’s articulation of “reparative reading.” Though Cavell offers few anti-homophobic readings apart from his account of Bette Davis in the *Now, Voyager* and “Postscript” chapters of *Contesting Tears*, in this “[e]njoining [of] a kind of suspicion of suspicion itself” he may be compared to Sedgwick, whom he engages at length in “Postscript”; for the source of the quotation, see Anne-Lise François, “Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives,” in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 37.

13. A Foucauldian relation to critical discourse and cultural theory is not beyond Cavell’s reach or interest. The last of the three epigraphs to “Performative and Passionate Utterance” reads: “It is in so far as discourse is common that it can become at once a place and an instrument of confrontation.—Michel Foucault”; Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 155. With Arnold Davidson, Cavell co-taught a seminar on Foucault and Freud at the University of Chicago in 1999.

hyperbolic expression as Nietzsche's: the joyful, cheerful, but also stressed-out, desperate, shrieking and "zany" styles of Nietzsche's writing with "spurs."<sup>14</sup>

It is true that Jane Austen's prose style is almost never manic, outside of a couple moments in *Persuasion* and in the boisterous juvenilia. In fact, in the lecture version of "Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow," Cavell stunningly calls the "surface" of her prose style one of "lethal calm." He narrates his "late" fascination with her novels as a response not to their "elation" and "thrill" of identification in the main marriage plots, but in response to "the stupidity, the silliness, the empty-headedness, the quality of being worn-out...of so many of her supporting players."<sup>15</sup> (Cavell does not mention particular characters, but I find it instructive and paradoxically enlivening to build the list of these "players," which must include the menacing boor and rattle John Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, the pathetic routine of Anne Steele with her dead-end talk of a doctor beau in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Miss DeBourgh, Mr. Collins, Lady Bertram, Mrs. Elton, and Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot in the more famous later novels from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Persuasion*.) "By the time of *Mansfield Park*, in 1815, there is mostly no one to identify with."<sup>16</sup> This list of vacuous, worn-out predicates joins with the stakes of the conversations of moral encounter in play throughout Cavell's writings about the film genre of the remarriage comedy with undeniably vibrant stars like Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant, because these remarriage "screwball" comedies for all their vibrant play must answer a comparable force of depletion, still "touching upon contemptuousness, inattentiveness, brutality, coldness, cowardice, vanity, thoughtlessness, unimaginativeness, heartlessness, deviousness, vengefulness."<sup>17</sup>

Among the many aspects of the literary (in) Cavell are his specifications of medium and genre: meaning not only philosophy, cinema, and literature; but within the latter, Shakespearean and modern tragedy, Romantic lyric poems, realist novels. I

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14. These terms, as used to characterize Nietzsche, are taken from Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 184-188; 222-232, and from Jacques Derrida's *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlowe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Ngai's account of the affective conditions of labor in the "new economy" in her chapter on the zany further stresses (in both senses) the affect of Nietzsche's tone in terms of gender. This approach makes her reading particularly relevant to the discussion of Jane Austen and the "feminine voice" of "passionate utterance"; Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 224ff.

15. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 126.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 121.

am aware there may be losses in moving too quickly between Cavell's bodies of thinking about film and the novel, and in relating these media without a careful critical translation to his philosophical writings. Here specifically, whatever the genre in view, the qualities admitted in the list above are specifications of the forces arrayed against Cavell's Emersonian "perfectionism" as a dynamic of "moral encounter."<sup>18</sup> Yet however threatening or neutralizing they may prove to that encounter, the negative attributes are internal to the task. Throughout his writing career, Cavell has been fired, inspired—as well as simultaneously floored—by the force of both of such staggering premises of personal incomprehension, non-expressiveness, and unfeeling, and by their equivalent at the institutional level, of philosophical and cultural "discounting." From here it is Cavell's stimulating and rigorous contribution to Austen Studies as a discounted area in the study of Romanticism, to claim that Austen's contained and minimized mode of expression *preserves* the philosophical standing of unmet, unsatisfied "rights of desire" in the criticism of this (*lawful*) world.

Thus Cavell can maintain of Austen: "You might say that her prose seeks incessantly to minimize (hence maintain) the expression of distress in everyday existence no less drastically than Nietzsche's seeks to maximize it."<sup>19</sup> Jane Austen performs this role not so much despite as *via* what Cavell terms her "narrator's renowned surface of containment."<sup>20</sup> Even Austen's most limited world in *Emma* can be shown to face down a zero-degree test for a sociable practice and stylistics of affective critique (rather than an official philosophy). As Emma and her father grieve the passing of Miss Taylor into Mrs. Weston through marriage, the narrator remarks that in this moment "Emma first sat in mournful thought of any continuance." Here is Cavell's gloss on that phrase: "I find that I am unsure whether this meditation means that she is vexed not to have her friend to continue their happy mode of existence; or whether it suggests that she is so grief-stricken that she cannot imagine wanting her own existence to continue; or whether, as mostly seems to me the case, that Emma herself cannot tell the difference."<sup>21</sup>

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18. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*.

19. *Ibid.*, 124.

20. *Ibid.*, 124. As noted above, in the Berkeley (Feb. 2002) Howison Lectures version of the chapter, Cavell does not say "renowned surface of containment" but instead (enunciating it with careful energy) "Jane Austen's celebrated surface of lethal calm." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTck\\_u1fpxc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTck_u1fpxc).

21. *Ibid.*, 124.

In such an insight, as well as in such a mood of indistinction of the crucial difference, Cavell sees in Austen a means of expressing the limits of what is and isn't experienced as livable, what the main character can recognize as a knowledge of the possible continuance of her life, or is willing to face going on with under the auspices of an interesting, hence to that degree consented-to, existence. This critical threshold of experience is felt as an expressive capacity, and limit, on what Austen can write, what her narrator can "say," and what the reader may be prepared to "hear." Cavell himself hears the sentence, put there by Austen's narrator and testifying to Emma's cognition, as Emma's own stunned responsiveness: not as a cognitive statement of indirect speech, that is, but as a kind of inexpressibly stifled and yet still audible perlocution. Thus to notice the almost imperceptible slightness of judgment in this negation of status quo life, comes in Austen as it were bound with a significant force and inescapable framing. Through Cavell, we notice *Emma's* minimal yet still definitive negations of the given conditions of life. (For one instance of such a condition: that life for Emma of such regular comforts and irritations, in Surrey, as one of many apparently very numerous counties that are dubbed "the garden of England": a cliché shared vacuously and insistently by Mrs. Elton, and at one level attested to by Austen's narrator—because Surrey is called that—and contemptuously negated at another as beneath even the use of her clarification—as almost everywhere in England is called that—by Emma herself.)<sup>22</sup> This practice of literary critical judgment positions Austen's novelistic program more or less explicitly after Kant's method in critical philosophy to define limits beyond which we cannot know, and hence what we can affirm and may lawfully hope for. Yet Cavell's intensive concern with the challenge to sustain interest goes powerfully against Kant's affective economy of disinterestedness. Nietzsche, contrasting Kant to Stendhal's description of the beautiful as "*une promesse de bonheur*," sounds off on this disinterestedness: "in each of Kant's famous definitions of the beautiful, the lack of a more differentiated experience of the self sits like a fat worm of fundamental error."<sup>23</sup>

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22. Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. George Justice; 4th edn. (New York: Norton, 2012), 188. The passage especially holds my attention due to J.L. Austin's scrupulous devotion to reclaim from skepticism "the garden of the world we live in"; see "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers*, 90.

23. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 83.

In *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* Cavell reminds us that way back in “Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy” (first published in 1965) from *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), he had come to understand and propose “Kant’s characterization of the aesthetic judgment” as the model for “what we should ordinarily say when, and what we should mean in saying it. The moral is that while general agreement with these claims can be ‘imputed’ or ‘demanded’ by philosophers, they cannot, as in the case of more straightforward empirical judgments, ‘postulate’ this agreement (using Kant’s terms).”<sup>24</sup> Such a displacement and expansion of the role of Kant’s practice of “reflecting judgment,” based on his concept of “subjective universality,” again makes the closely modeled revision of Kant the pattern of a new philosophy, as it was already in German Romanticism. Cavell develops beyond a Kantian approach by taking up ordinary language philosophy and its criteria and claims to begin with; but also—and overgoing Kantian and other foundations to a further extent than the post-Kantian Romantics of the “literary absolute” had done—in accounting for the “passionate utterances” that J.L. Austin, Cavell’s teacher, organizes under the name *perlocution*.

Between Nietzsche and Austen, there is neither a stable binary contrast nor a clear spectrum of some kind of measure of “passionate utterance,” not only because Austen’s “renowned surface of containment” preserves a minimal and hence irreducible amount of negation and distress, but also because the question of lawfulness registers internally in Nietzsche’s text on the task of creating a human being with the “right to make promises.” While the mobile literary style of Nietzsche’s writing compels us to move on in reading—rather than stop to make one-to-one assessments of constative truth claims—nearly every aspect of this famous quotation registers the question, the weight, of judging the urgent difference between conventional language and what Cavell would call “perfectionist” modes of expression. “To breed an animal with the right to make promises”: is the tone of any of that “straight” and free from contempt? But also, isn’t every bit of this directive instated with an almost unintelligible earnestness? (For just one instance, I have already pointed out that Cavell makes use of the almost culturally untouchable “breeding.”) Most practically, there is debate over the translation of *versprechen darf*. Does it invoke even ironically the discourse of contractual rights? Should it be translated simply, “who makes promises,” with an unaided relative pronoun, without the “right”? Or should the translation

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24. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 9.

lean more on the *darf*, from the modal verb *dürfen*, and render the translation as “who may make promises” (or “is permitted” or “can,” which is either the language of morality or of will, force, and capacity).<sup>25</sup>

Even before we get to the classic illocutionary act of promise-making in the famous bit of language from *On The Genealogy of Morals*, the challenge of translating *versprechen darf* demands that we consider the difference between a pre- and other-authorized dimension of lawful “rights” (and consider its Nietzschean transvaluation into a possible dimension not of contractual but of higher and rarer, self-authoring “rights”), as well as to consider a passional dimension. What can giving oneself permission mean for the individual citizen subject of “right”-based law? Indeed, Nietzsche’s first use of the language of rights in *On the Genealogy*, again from the preface, invokes this term not in the contractual sense, but in the language of what we may say with grounds in ordinary language: “*Mit Recht hat man gesagt.*”<sup>26</sup> What can giving ourselves permission to speak thus mean beyond or beside the law? What does it mean to think of the promise as a capacity in which one grants a kind of self-permission to feeling (to be an animal who may/can/ is permitted to promise, and makes promises, and iteratively if not interchangeably, more than one and more than once), knowing that “making” a promise is not an act governed by the external authority of lawful institutions?<sup>27</sup> A promise for the “literary” philosopher, however full, is not bound determinately to the understanding of a contractual tie to be kept (though if “happy” it is kept). If the right to make promises is always open to both linguistic and human sequels, partly this is because, if we may be happy, it means to give more than we own of ourselves.<sup>28</sup> Happiness is an evental unfolding, not a stabilized intentional structure.

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25. Another edition of the text brings personal and class “rights” into the mix, by rendering the phrase, “To breed an animal with the *prerogative* to promise”; *On the Genealogy of Morality*; revised student edition, trans. Carol Diethe and ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35; my italics.

26. “How right is the saying,” is one possible translation that has been used.

27. See Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 122-123.

28. Does this affirmation of the contingent and not-fully agential self mean to depart from Nietzsche’s expression of the man-animal who “promises like a sovereign—seriously, seldom, slowly—who is sparing with his trust, who confers distinction when he trusts” (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 41)? Nietzsche’s sovereign promise is bound by and takes its force not merely from psychic and physiological memory but from what he calls “a real memory of the will”: “This development is not merely the result of a passive inability to rid oneself of an impression once etched on the mind, nor of the incapacity to digest a once-given word with which one is never through, but represents rather an active *will* not to let go, an ongoing willing of what was once willed, a real *memory of the will*: so that between the original ‘I will,’ ‘I shall do,’ and the actual realization of the will, its *enactment*, a world of new and strange things, circumstances, even other acts of will may safely intervene, without causing this long chain of the will to break” (*ibid.*, 40).

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A fiat-like power—expressed through the unconditioned originating power of the *logos*—features in understandings of the “romantic Performative” in foundational accounts such as the work of Angela Esterhammer. In his recent book *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, David Rudrum has used Esterhammer’s work to develop an account of the (Austinian) performative in Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* by way of Cavell.<sup>29</sup> But this approach remains—as it is in Austin’s foundational enterprise and in a different way in Esterhammer’s magisterial comparative study of linguistic romanticisms—fundamentally an account of illocution. A broadened concept of illocution shades into the natural supernatural by way of its penumbra of “force”: the aspect of the performative utterance that cannot be explained grammatically, that is, cannot be explained apart from situational tone, and hence leads the transition in the second half of *How to Do Things with Words* into the lectures on perlocution as “a third kind of act” subject neither to referential falsification (as constative statements supposedly are subject internally) nor to stabilization by context (as the official Austin of most of *How to Do Things with Words* positions his “happy” illocutions).<sup>30</sup>

Having myself written a book on romantic fiat that considered in this more or less theological way how language not only exists but attaches the world (and us? philosophers? poets? to the world), I now put forth perlocution as the major alternative way to reconsider this question of affective movement, sequels, and the being and attachment of language to the world, as well as the intersubjective zone of actual language users in confrontation and exchange. The displacement of the *unmoved* mover of causation that drives the classic theological way of thought perhaps can still be recognized in its change into the question of how responsibility, the over- and under-determination of cause on passion, “direct” or “indirect,” adequate or no, appears as a crucial but unsolvable issue in forming any system of perlocution.<sup>31</sup> Like the fiat, perlocution is performative and eventual language, but unlike the fiat (or even its Colerid-

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29. Angela Esterhammer, *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); David Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

30. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 101.

31. Daniel Stout’s forthcoming study of modern “corporate” causation in *Justice After Persons: Corporate Personhood in the Romantic Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press) will be of great help on this question, though Stout’s interest lies more in applications of legal theory and history to narrative, than in “passionate utterance” as a subjective experience.

gean echoes), perlocutionary events unfold temporally as sequels, not as instations of singular, originary utterance, or even as such utterances proliferating in sequence. Beginning with the self-knowledge of their speaker, perlocutions are not subject to limits and stability. Thus though so far I've taken Cavell to be aligned with and motivated by Nietzsche's literary voice in philosophy, especially but not only with regard to Cavell's commitment to perfectionist conversation and perlocutionary sequels as forming a claim on the future (tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow), here Nietzsche's overriding emphasis on will breaks both with the experience of passionate exchange and with the indeterminate nature of its assessment.

J.L. Austin says dryly that such contextual/ circumstantial "resources" of language are "over-rich." But on re-reading, this time after Cavell's chapter on "Performative and Passionate Utterance," the relevant sections on perlocution in *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin comes across (to me) as less constraining than expected. Perlocution is afforded thirty pages, and there are several brief but uncontainably devious moments that more than ruffle the premise of a lawful, tidy, professorial exposition. Perhaps, as a Jane Austen scholar, I am prone to this amplifying response because J.L. Austin takes *persuasion* as his first instance of the kind of "consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions" that he terms the perlocutionary realm. The first example he gives of this realm, filed as Act C.a., is frankly weird—definitely mixed up with the experience of total warfare in the Second World War (where Austin served in British Intelligence), but mixed with something else too. It's an example on being urged, or advised, or persuaded "to shoot her"; and then Austin's second example of perlocution reverberates with a Thomas Wyatt or Bishop Lowth-like rendition of calling out in Hebrew Penitential Psalm: "He pulled me up, checked me," followed by the more empiricist and fidgety, "He stopped me, he brought me to my senses, &c. He annoyed me."<sup>32</sup> (With just these two wildly underdetermined examples, Austin evokes the range of perlocution from wrestling with God to jostling with everyday discomposure.) Austin can write: "It is always possible, for example, to try to thank or inform somebody yet in different ways to fail, because he doesn't listen, or takes it as ironical, or wasn't responsible for whatever it was, and so on. This distinction will arise, as over any act, over lo-

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32. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 102. Austin uses the word "devious" of himself and his ordinary language method on 123.

cutionary acts too; but failures here will not be unhappinesses as there, but rather failures to get the words out, to express ourselves clearly, etc.”<sup>33</sup> Apart from the big embedded assumption that the philosopher speaks for the norm against which others may depart (people may fail to listen responsibly and heed), Austin sounds like Cavell; or, more accurately, the derivable source of Cavell’s work in acknowledging passion is heard, in a moment such as this. Still, granting however much suggestiveness this productive (and not simply sidelined) equivocation ought to have, Austin has a way of saying (not without fastidious charisma), “But in a way these resources are over-rich.”<sup>34</sup> Hence Cavell’s idea that Austin’s institutional grounding demands both alterity and opposition. But we can’t fail to see that Cavell’s expression of critique is derived itself from a perlocutionary entailment from Austin. It is derived from his gratitude.

“A Performative utterance is an offer of participation in the order of law,” Cavell concludes in the essay “Something out of the Ordinary.” He goes on: “[a]nd perhaps we can say: A passionate utterance is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.”<sup>35</sup> So given this formulation and the discussion above, what exactly is Cavell up to when he effectively, lawfully, lists and orders the “necessary conditions” for perlocution? It cannot be just an anti-enlightenment parody like Foucault’s encyclopedic taxonomy, riffing on Borges with lucid–mad laughter, in the Preface to *The Order of Things*;<sup>36</sup> Cavell follows his own idiosyncratically Kantian method of being a rigorist in critical philosophy just so far as he can, and a specifier in indeterminate aesthetic and subjectively human matters in the descriptions and judgments that go beyond rule-following.<sup>37</sup> He also honors Austin’s insistence not only on finding order in the pleasures of agreement where possible, but in stressing the richly plural but finite character of linguistic experience. But nevertheless, the linear, almost bullet-point exposition of the following passage is difficult to keep free of a tone. Cavell’s ability to sustain an earnest regard for all aspects of his teacher Austin may

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33. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 106.

34. *Ibid.*, 76.

35. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 19.

36. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970), xv.

37. I owe this use of “specifier” to Simon Jarvis, who carried a quotation from the Russian Formalist critic Boris Eichenbaum—“We are not formalists, we are specifiers”—as a kind of flag in his English Institute presentation of Sept, 2013. Cavell, however, also uses the word in much the same way, perhaps in contrast to abstract systematic philosophy rather than the imputation of literary formalism. For the published version of this talk, see Simon Jarvis, “How To Do Things With Tunes,” *ELH* 82.2 (Summer 2015), 365–383.

allow for irony-free seriousness; but readers of Cavell might find they just can't maintain it. Cavell maps out the necessary conditions of passionate utterance:

I propose that something corresponding to what Austin lists as the six necessary conditions (he sometimes calls them rules) for the felicity of performative utterance holds for passionate utterance. Austin's are (1) there must exist a conventional procedure for uttering certain words in certain contexts, (2) the particular persons and circumstances must be appropriate for the invocation of the procedure, (3) the procedure must be executed correctly and (4) completely, (5) where the procedure requires certain thoughts or feelings or intentions for the inauguration of consequential conduct, the parties must have those feelings or thoughts and intend so to conduct themselves, and further (6) actually so conduct themselves subsequently. Now in the case of passionate speech, in questioning or confronting you with your conduct, all this is overturned, but specifically and in detail.

There is (Austin notes) no conventional procedure for appealing to you to act in response to my expression of passion (of outrage at your treachery or callousness, of jealousy over your attentions, of hurt over your slights of recognition). Call this absence of convention the first condition of passionate utterance; and let's go further. Whether, then, I have the standing to appeal to or to question you—to single you out as the object of my passion—is part of the argument to ensue. Call standing and singling out the second and third conditions of passionate utterance. These conditions for felicity, or say appropriateness, are not given a priori but are to be discovered or refined, or else the effort to articulate it is to be denied. There is no question therefore of executing a procedure correctly and completely, but there are further unshiftable demands, or rules, that (fourth) the one uttering a passion must have the passion, and (fifth) the one singled out must respond now and here, and (sixth) respond in kind, that is to say, be moved to respond, or else resist the demand.<sup>38</sup>

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38. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 18-19.

In “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” Cavell reviews the perlocutionary conditions (if anything) more systematically, before adding this seventh “rule”:

I add to this list, registering a final asymmetry:

*Perloc 7:* You may contest my invitation to exchange, at any or all of the points marked by the list of conditions for the successful perlocutionary act, for example, deny that I have standing with you, or question my consciousness of my passion, or dismiss the demand for the kind of response I seek, or ask to postpone it, or worse. I may or may not have further means of response. (We may understand such exchanges as instances of, or attempts at, moral education.)<sup>39</sup>

In another project I examine two literary texts (poems and a letter on poetics), by Claudia Rankine and Keats, which put a curious kind of pressure on a few of these conditions: namely, that “the one singled out must respond *now and here*, and (sixth) respond in kind, that is to say, be moved to respond, or else resist the demand” (emphasis added); with the amplification of the last “rule” in its apparent neutralization in the questioning, denial, dismissal, postponement, or unavailability of “further means of response.” Cavell in *The Claim of Reason* articulates a way in which to respond to the suffering of others, despite the unavailability of the subject in the moment, which allows “freedom for a further response.” Cavell’s romantic perfectionism allows for the fluctuating (non-) succession as the future, or sequel to this realm of further responsiveness beyond stable predication. The generous outward gesture, which Cavell extends not only to future readers, but to dead literary authors and toward himself too, lies in disburdening the (near) affective nullity from its added burden of pressing and disabling shame to allow space to experience both “another’s misery [as] unforgettable” and for “freedom for a further response” in oneself.<sup>40</sup>

Yet here in the context of this essay and its treatment of the Literary Cavell, as opposed to the scene of face to face conversation through which Cavell insistently models his thinking on perlocution, it must suffice to notice the alignment of Cavell’s perlocutionary condition #7 with key aspects of the space of literature itself: with the ques-

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39. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 182.

40. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press), 82.

tioning or even removal of the author's presence; with the scriptural, and with *différance*. As French theorists of *l'écriture* as different as Blanchot and Foucault intimate, this is a gray space. Such an affectively neutralizing "asymmetry" presents a strong challenge not so much to the systematicity (which he does not attempt) as to the possibility of claiming a pre-determinate (or an indexical, urgently referential, *right-here* determined) contemporary historical uptake of Cavell's major project of elaborating on the interests, rights, and responsibilities of the perlocutionary realm. Already in Part One of *The Claim of Reason* there is an instance of this important criticism of the urgent nature of present demands, in the example of knowing the "distance" of suffering in Keats, and in assessing the dimension of a "freedom for further response" that anticipates the acknowledgment of incapacity and non-responsiveness in his language of 2005, "I may or may not have further means of response."<sup>41</sup> Except in a perlocutionary sense, it does not appear "already" or "anticipate" in that master work of 1979, because nothing in Cavell's later writings I've considered is being prevented in advance or defended from, forestalled, by arguments offered in *The Claim of Reason*.

As important to this topic as the reflections he shares on literary texts in themselves, Cavell's literary mode as a writer and thinker opens up a space of intensive, non-coercible, yet specifiable thought. As the wonderful, wily (not in the usual sense weary) old mother character says in an unforgettable moment when she is about to plan a party at the behest of her daughter, in a film that was important to the young Cavell, Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), "One can never prevent a single human being from any kind of suffering. That's what makes one so tremendously weary." To end back with Nietzsche and *The Genealogy of Morals* (this essay having been a prolongation of the interval between the Second Essay's second and third sentences, already marked by an ellipsis in the original), "[t]he extent to which this problem" of breeding the promise-making animal "has been solved must seem all the more surprising to someone who fully appreciates the countervailing force of *forgetfulness*" as an "active...positive...inhibiting capacity, responsible for the fact" that we can absorb and return the contact of experience, take part in conversation and confrontation, and respond to the word's touch.<sup>42</sup> The very opacity of perlocution to

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41. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 82.

42. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 39.

traditional knowledge claims makes it a touching dimension of knowing, and suggests linguistic philosophy's relation to the textural modes of literary knowing, whether the proffered reading methodology be "close" or "surface." An alignment of the literary in Cavell with this (in)capacity for active forgetfulness, also suggests to me an alternate route to the final sentence of *The Claim of Reason* and its famous questions, can philosophy become literature and still know itself? Can philosophy accept (its) knowledge back at the hands of poetry? And is the measure of Cavellian acknowledgment inseparable from the cost of unknowing, if knowledge is to be defined as the prerogative of a fully conscious animal?

The three epigraphs I have taken for this essay have been functioning so far, if they have performed a role at all for the reader, themselves only as resonances and touches, rather than to structure the line of argument I have taken on Cavell, Nietzsche, and Austen (and Austin) with regard to promise-making and perlocution. So let me describe their explicit contributions to my thinking on where the literary (in) Cavell leaves me. In Hamacher's philological thesis is the idea that we want, we are tasked, to go beyond the model of language as predication, but that we cannot do so through a simple irreversible act or wish—for the former is exposed as "violent," the latter identified as "utopian" or pious. In Austin's "A Plea for Excuses," we see not only the constative / performative distinction in play, but already the initiation of a supple critique of Austin's own rage to order in *How to Do Things With Words* amongst types of verbal action—the demarcation between illocution and perlocution foremost. In Bergman's tremendous marriage farce *Smiles of a Summer Night*, I hear something not only of Keats's vale of soul-making, but in the shared exposure to suffering, a mood and project that leads curiously back to a language of constation and letting things be, if only because the "preventing" of suffering of "a single human being" is neutralized between two relations to experience that are literary, and between which another writer—in fact, Austen—would carve out the discursive space of free indirect speech: the wizened old mother's third-person perspective, as close to a titanic narrative omniscience as a human representation could be; and the mortal first-person condition acknowledged by her of her daughter with love and chagrin, that the individual cannot be spared her particular and costly experiences even if they only serve to instance such poor lessons of where the ordinary and perfectionism meet.

# A Plea for Perlocutions

DAVID KAUFMANN

After staging the shipwreck of the constative-performative distinction halfway through *How To Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin goes on famously to “make a fresh start on the problem.”<sup>1</sup> He relinquishes the original opposition between making statements and doing things and then introduces a ternary account of speech acts. He distinguishes between locutionary acts (in which we produce sounds with “a certain sense and a certain reference”[95]), illocutionary acts (in which we perform acts such as “asking or answering a question, giving some information... announcing a verdict...and the numerous like” [98-99]), and perlocutionary acts (in which we “produce consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of an audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons”[101]). For all the philosophical ink that has been spilled on Austin, not much has been devoted to perlocutions. Locutions and illocutions get almost all the action.

Stanley Cavell has been one of the few philosophers to emphasize the importance of the perlocutionary for speech act theory. In his forward to the second edition of Shoshana Felman’s *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* and in his essay “Performative and Passionate Utterances,” Cavell assumes, as Stephen Mulhall puts it, that Austin believes that “the perlocutionary effect of any utterance [is] extrinsic to its sense and force” and thus that the perlocutionary can be opposed to the illocutionary act.<sup>2</sup> Because Austin maintains that the illocutionary is conventional and the perlocutionary is not (121), Cavell argues that illocutions come down on the side of the Law, while perlocutions give voice to Desire. Where the illocutionary is scripted and prescribed, the perlocutionary opens up space for improvisations.<sup>3</sup> According to Mulhall,

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1. J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) 91. All further references, unless noted, will be included parenthetically in the text.

2. Stephen Mulhall, “Convention in the Theory of Speech Acts,” in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006), 31.

3. See Cavell, “Forward” to Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xi-xxi and “Performative and Passionate Utterances,” *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 155-91.

Cavell proposes a radical innovation to Austin's theory by suggesting that the perlocution is "as internal to any genuine speech-act as are its locutionary and illocutionary dimensions."<sup>4</sup> I am going to argue in this essay that Cavell does not really revise Austin's theory. He gives voice to what Austin actually says.

Austin's insistence in the penultimate lecture of *How To Do Things With Words* on "the total speech act in the total speech situation" reminds us that the speech act encompasses more than its illocutionary and locutionary dimensions. Our utterances have not just sense and force, but purpose as well. Part of the problem that Austin presents to his interpreters lies with the fact that the perlocutionary involves not just effect but intention, so while actual perlocutionary effect might sometimes seem extrinsic to the total speech act, perlocutionary aim should not. An example: if I warn you that the bull might charge, then I really am trying to affect your beliefs or your subsequent behavior, though you might not take my warning to heart. My aim is clear, but my success is not assured.

We should also note that my warning and my attempt to influence your thoughts or your actions do not actually constitute separate *acts*, although Austin does indeed talk about them as if they did. This has to do with a trick of description, a question of stress, not an actual difference. When we describe a speech act in terms of its perlocutionary aim rather than illocutionary force, we are emphasizing one dimension of the utterance at the expense of another. If we say that in an address on a given date the President persuaded Congress to authorize military force instead of saying that he maintained correctly or incorrectly that a Middle-Eastern dictator had weapons of mass destruction, we are not indicating that the President performed two separate acts. We are just looking at different aspects of a single one.

So, I am claiming that the complexity of utterances—and the fact that we draw distinctions when we emphasize their different dimensions—leads Austin to talk about the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary as if these were discrete *acts*, rather than moments in the "total speech act in the total speech situation" (148). I stress this, because Austin calls on us to keep that total speech act in mind when we think about an utterance's meaning, force and effect. Austin makes it clear that to perform a locutionary act is "*eo ipso* to perform an *illocutionary* act" (98). When he

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4. Mulhall, "Convention in the Theory of Speech Acts," 31.

maintains that the illocutionary and the locutionary are abstractions (147), he is reminding us that they are handy reifications, but that they are reifications nonetheless. That is why in the end, Austin tells us that “what we have to study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation.” In that speech situation, stating is both “performing an [illocutionary] act” and “performing perlocutionary acts of all kinds” (139). We therefore mistake him if we imagine that we can easily oppose illocutions to perlocutions and thus pull asunder what Austin has surely joined. A full account of a speech act will have to comprehend the whole kit. It will have to look at its locutionary “meaning” (its sense and reference), its illocutionary force and both its perlocutionary aims and effects as well.

A problem quickly arises: when Austin tells us that the locutionary and illocutionary are merely abstractions, he does not mention the perlocutionary at all. Why, then, does he let the perlocutionary drop when it comes time to make his pitch for the total speech act? There are two pertinent but ultimately local reasons for this. The first and most obvious one is that Austin has other fish to fly. Austin claims that philosophers have stiffed the illocutionary in favor of the locutionary and, to a lesser extent, the perlocutionary (103). Accordingly, the purpose of his lectures is to restore balance by emphasizing the illocutionary. Because he also wants to play old Harry with the worn-out philosophical distinctions between truth and falsehood and between fact and value, Austin does not have time to worry about persuasion, intimidation, consolation and all the other flavors of perlocutionary effect.

The other reason that Austin leaves the perlocutionary out of his conclusions has to do with the undeniable fact that not *all* speech acts have a perlocutionary aim. As Austin reminds us, promises frequently lack perlocutionary intent (126). The same goes for other ritual performatives. If I swear to tell the whole truth in a court of law, I am not trying to persuade you of anything, and if I, as a baseball umpire, call you out, I am not particularly interested in your feelings. I just want you to scurry back to the dugout as quickly as possible.

This objection is well taken, but limited. It should not make us forget that conventional procedures leave plenty of scope for our perlocutionary aims. You might wager a huge sum in order to scare me into folding (I am susceptible to bluffs) or you might make a solemn promise in order to impress me with your probity (I am easily

impressed). So, while Austin is certainly right to deny that *every* speech act has a perlocutionary moment, it is a safe bet that *most* do. It might be harder to come up with a taxonomy of these moments, but that does not mean that we are free to ignore them.

Bearing all this in mind, I want to ask what happens if we factor the perlocutionary back into our account of Austin's work. What must we do to give it the importance that Austin, in spite of his theory, is not quite willing to lend it? What are the consequences for us if we take seriously Austin's contention that the terms "true" and "false" only stand "for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say...in these circumstances, to this audience, *for these purposes and with these intentions*" (145; emphasis added)?

The quickest way into my argument is to look at the claims that Alice Crary has spelled out in her articles "Happy Truth" and "Austin and the Ethics of Discourse" as well as in her book *Beyond Moral Judgment*.<sup>5</sup> Crary's discussions of Austin are really local skirmishes in a much broader assault on the tradition of modern moral theory. She maintains that philosophers' habit of banning personal sensibility from rationality and the concomitant restriction of moral reasoning to agreements or disagreements about judgments impoverishes our understanding of the reach of moral thought. Crary looks to Austin to show that the abstractions considered necessary to ascertain the literal sentence-meaning of an utterance are of a piece with the prejudicial demand that we leave our individual sensitivities at the door when we come to use moral concepts. She argues that we give up too much when we reduce our assessments of utterances to consideration of literal sentence-meaning, just as we give up too much when we imagine that moral thought has to be shorn of affect. In the end, we can return utterances to their native habitat in lived experience without giving up philosophy's demand for objectivity and rationality.

I will not follow Crary quite that far. By offering an account of the place of convention and the perlocutionary in *How To Do Things With Words*, I hope to induce

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5. Alice Crary, "The Happy Truth: J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*," *Inquiry* 45.1 (2002), 59-80; "Austin and the Ethics of Discourse," in *Reading Cavell*, 42-65; *Beyond Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 49-95. My arguments are also indebted to James Conant, "Three ways of Inheriting Austin," *La philosophie du langage ordinaire: Histoire et actualité de la philosophie d'Oxford / Ordinary Language Philosophy: The History and Contemporary Relevance of Oxford Philosophy*, ed. Christoph Al-Saleh and Sandra Laugier (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 2011) 395-415 and Avner Baz, "Knowing Knowing (that Such and Such)," *The Philosophy of J.L. Austin*, ed. Martin Gustafsson and Richard Sørli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 146-175.

people to adopt what I take to be Austin's most expansive understanding of what meaning means. By emphasizing the importance of both perlocutionary aims and effects, I also hope to clear some space for the ethical and the aesthetic, though I am well aware that the both the "ethical" and the "aesthetic" serve here as indications that will require further discussion.

As I have just rehearsed Crary's broader argument, I will put her claims about Austin as briefly as I can. Crary shows that Austin organizes *How To Do Things With Words* in such a way as to make it impossible for his audience to do what 20<sup>th</sup>-century Anglophone philosophers like to do, that is, talk about literal sentence-meanings that are somehow distinguishable from the situation of an utterance's occurrence. He wants to cure them of their habit of treating sentences as if they were susceptible to being either true or false, independent of their context. Austin rejects this. He is not interested in statements (or in sentences for that matter.) Rather, he is interested in entire utterances and the speech situations in which they occur.

Austin's demonstration that constative statements are as liable to infelicity as performatives are to falsehood drives home his conclusion that we cannot differentiate the "meaning" of a "statement" from the force and the occasion of its saying. (The scare quotes are Austin's and Crary's.) As *How To Do Things With Words* gains steam, Austin argues that we cannot speak, as philosophers have been tempted to do, of unsituated meaning. There is no such thing as a pure locutionary act to which an illocutionary force is then somehow added. Rather, he shows that the locutionary, the illocutionary and the perlocutionary constitute related dimensions of a single act. At his most radical—and it is Crary's point that commentators have avoided the full implications of his argument—Austin indicates that we don't begin with "meanings" at all. We don't start off with an utterance's detachable "sense and reference" which we then recast as questions or assertions or demands. Rather, force and effect are as integral to the total speech act as its sense and reference. Thus to reduce an utterance to its locutionary "meaning" gives us an inaccurate and impoverished notion of how it is that utterances mean. As I have already had occasion to mention, in the second-to-last lecture of *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin shows that we can only properly speak of meaning in the same way that we talk of truth, that is, in light of all the

dimensions of an utterance's occurrence. We have to consider its sense and reference, its force, its context and its intended (and actual) effects.<sup>6</sup>

Austin's rejection of the idea that a statement's meaning is independent of that statement's linguistic conventions and effects does not mean that he foregoes the possibility of objective truth. According to Crary, the idea that objective truth will go by the board as soon as we do away with literal sentence-meaning (a notion that Derrida and Searle seem to share) is based on a sneaking metaphysical assumption that Austin's conclusions do not allow. According to Crary, it is a fundamental feature of Austin's position that there is no such thing as a "*non-conventional* alternative to our current conception of the world" (emphasis added). There is thus "no such thing as a comparison between our current conception and such an alternative." If we are rigorous in our refusal of literal sentence-meanings, we have to forego "the sort of metaphysical vantage point from which to discern that our efforts thus to separate ourselves [from literal sentence-meanings] cut us off from objective truth."<sup>7</sup> In other words, to get rid of literal sentence-meaning is also to get rid of the idea that we could stand somewhere outside of language or convention.

Crary thus reminds of two important points. The first is that *How To Do Things With Words* is constructed as a pedagogical text, an exemplary demonstration of how to think a problem through. At one moment, Austin imagines that his audience is impatient and wants him "to cut the cackle" and cut to the chase (123). But it takes him a long time to do that. The categorical distinction between the performative and the constative, which looked so promising at the start, has to founder midway so that we can see that we are not talking about separate kinds of sentences, but rather about features that are common to all sentences. It takes Austin a number of pages to show that the formulae that might distinguish the illocutionary from the perlocutionary are not conclusive. In other words, Austin works them through in order to work them—and his audience—over, or, to use one of his own jokes, he is flogging us until we are converted. This means some of his moves are tactical feints.

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6. For a dissenting view, see Hansen's sympathetic critique of Crary's reading of Austin. I suspect that Hansen accepts too readily some of Austin's tactical feints. Nat Hansen, "J. L. Austin and Literal Meaning," *European Journal of Philosophy* 22.4 (2013), 617-632.

7. Crary, "Austin and the Ethics of Discourse," 53.

Crary also reminds us of the centrality of convention to Austin's argument. As the illocutionary is *eo ipso* conventional—a point that Austin makes on several occasions—and as there is no *non-conventional* conception of the world to which we can appeal, a lot is riding on what he means by “convention.” Even so, we have to come to terms with the fact that Austin never provides us with a full-blooded account of what “convention” means. It might well be that some of the misunderstandings that Austin's work is heir to turn on a misapprehension of what Austin thinks conventionality actually entails.

*How To Do Things With Words* begins with clear and clearly delimited forms of convention, with the ceremonies and rituals of marrying, playing cricket, pronouncing verdicts and christening ships. Austin also dwells on less institutionalized, but nevertheless equally ritualized performative acts such as betting and choosing up sides for games. And of course, central to his preoccupations lies the act of promising, which though not in itself either a ceremony or a ritual, serves as the basis of any number of rituals as well as performances of the law.<sup>8</sup> But as Strawson noted early on, Austin's account of ritual convention does not apply to most of the performatives or illocutions that concern him. While there are set gestures for begging and entreating, there is no ritual, *per se*, for either. Nor is there a ritual script for demanding or requesting or asserting or warning, let alone recommending, claiming, favoring, postulating or deducing. You cannot draw a straight line from christening a baby to recommending a wine or wondering if it will rain.<sup>9</sup>

By the same token, we cannot say that Austin is arguing that, as illocutionary acts rely on language and as language is merely a “conventional, convention-employing means for getting things done,” then all illocutionary acts are conventional by virtue of their use of words. In this view, what makes the illocutionary conventional is merely the fact that it is part of an “act of speaking” or a “making use of language.”<sup>10</sup> This will not do, as Warnock notes, because such a definition is at best trivial and at worst incorrect. Trivial, because it states the obvious: all speech acts are, by virtue of

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8. A good deal of the confusion around Austin's account of promises would disappear if he distinguished more clearly between the act of *making* a promise and the related, but different, act of *keeping* one.

9. P.F. Strawson, “Intention and Convention in Speech Acts,” *Symposium on J.L. Austin*, ed. K.T. Fann (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 38-400.

10. This is Warnock's description of a position that he finds untenable. G.J. Warnock, *J.L. Austin* (London: Routledge, 1989), 127.

being speech, based on language. Incorrect, because some illocutionary acts do not actually require words at all. You can make gestures of entreaty or deny an allegation with a mere shake of your head. So illocutionary acts are not necessarily linguistic. You cannot say the same of locutionary acts. You cannot perform a locutionary act without language. If any dimension of the speech act situation is solely and thus “conventionally” linguistic (in this broad sense), it is the locutionary.

Strawson suggests that what is at stake in Austin’s insistence on the conventionality of illocutions is not conventionality in itself, but intention. A speaker’s intention in a ceremonial speech act is not ambiguous. What Austin calls uptake—“bringing about the understanding of the meaning and the force of the locution” (117)—is not an issue in ceremonies and games, because the verbal formulas of ritual performatives leave no doubt about the meaning and the force of the formulas. This is not the case with other illocutions, hence the importance of the explicit performative (“I claim” or “I assert” or “I suggest”). Warnock, who agrees with Strawson, puts it this way: the explicit performative “conventionalizes” non-conventional illocutions. It makes their intended force clear.<sup>11</sup>

This account finds the warrant for the explicit performative in the relative under-determination of many illocutionary acts. Unless I make it plain, you might not realize that my warning is a warning, rather than a terse description of a bull or a sniper or an impending storm. Strawson and Warnock maintain that unless I *do* make it plain, you might not know which illocutionary act I intend. Their explanation makes sense, but it begs the issue of why Austin might want to call an estimate, a recommendation or assurance *conventional*. Strawson and Warnock show that the explicit performative behaves *like* a convention, not that it *is* a convention. While the explicit performative might serve the same function as a ritual formula, that does not make it one.

I would like to take a crack at this problem by splitting the difference between Austin’s initial strong identification of convention with ritual and the trivial definition of illocutionary convention as a mere “making use of language.” Austin suggests that illocutions produce a certain range of consequences. These are different from the consequences that attend the perlocutionary, because they are narrower. Perlocutionary effects sometimes—even often—depend on the idiosyncrasies of the people who

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11. Warnock, *J.L. Austin*, 132-133.

are addressed. In spite of my best efforts, you might refuse to be intimidated, fail to be convinced, or remain unwilling to be moved by what I say. Illocutions, on the other hand, “invite *by convention* a response or a sequel” (117; emphasis added). The range of this response and sequel is delimited by the illocutionary verb itself. If you ask me a question, the question by its very nature invites me to answer. (My silence might in itself be an answer.) If you order me to do something, the command by its very nature invites me to obey, just as your request invites me accede. Austin says that “the response or sequel might be ‘one-way’ or ‘two-way’” (117) because there is a difference between committing myself by making a promise (or claiming that I know something) and asking you to wipe your feet. The rules that govern these acts and their sequels might be governed by social rituals or by the informal sanctions we call manners, but they all form part of our ability to speak the language. If I know how to offer you a drink, I know that you can decline the offer. Part of the point of uptake, then, is recognizing not just what act is being performed, but also understanding what sequel or response is being solicited. Illocutions are vulnerable to misfire precisely because their force and thus their sequels can so easily be mistaken.

While in some cases my ability to tell the difference between a demand, a request and an entreaty might require both tact and insight, the ability to tell this difference ultimately lies not with my psychological acumen or my good manners, but with my basic linguistic competence. The important distinctions between these acts are inscribed in, or prescribed by, our language. They are intrinsic to our description of the acts we perform and our understanding of the sequels that those acts invite. Illocutionary conventions, then, lie below the level of ritual and etiquette (although it might be rude not to answer a question). They rest on the distinctions that we enact when we perform, describe or respond to illocutionary acts. If I misunderstand your request as a demand—if there is a catch in the uptake—my response will not be the conventional one. The result could turn out well or badly, as either comedy or tragedy, depending.

The linguistic rules and expectations at play in illocutionary acts make their sequels and responses more predictable than is possible with perlocutionary acts. This is because illocutions are conventional in ways that a perlocution cannot be. Because I cannot say “I persuade you,” I cannot put you in a position where the possible range of sequels to my attempt is set. I can come close to an explicit perlocutionary

act by admitting that I am *trying* to persuade you, but such a statement of intent is usually taken to be a sign of failure. As it is, the perlocutionary always requires other means to achieve its ends—it makes use of locutionary-illocutionary acts—and it cannot speak its name except in retrospect or in disappointment. These are indications of its constitutional vulnerability.

In the end, perlocutionary effect depends on a wide array of context-specific variables, and can never simply rely on our linguistic competence the way the illocutionary can. This is why Cavell sees it as a form of improvisation. The perlocutionary is often the scene of surprise or disappointment. I can accept your argument, but I might find it trivial—you have not impressed me. (If you meant to impress me, you have failed.) I might not agree with your assertion that “all flesh is grass,” but I might take heart from your having said it. (You have succeeded in consoling me, but not as you had planned.) When you warn me that jumping from the second story into the snow is dangerous, I, being foolhardy, might find myself moved to fling myself from the window for fun. (You have persuaded me to do it, in spite of your intention. This can either be counted as a failure or as an ironic success.) In short, with the perlocutionary, there is no telling how things will go.

So, we can say that speech acts are conventional to the extent that they derive their locutionary sense and their illocutionary force from the established conventions of our language. Their sense comes from our shared definitions and their force from the set range of responses and sequels that illocutionary verbs invite. But there is no reason to take this pervasive conventionality as a call for skepticism. Post-Saussurean appropriations of Austin go against the grain because Austin was trained as a philologist and had an essentially historical view of language. He did not assume that words get their meaning from their place in an arbitrary differential system nor did he see that convention was conclusively arbitrary. Austin refuses to be drawn into a latter-day Idealism much in the same way that he refuses the pragmatist doctrine “that the true is what works, &c.” (145). This is because he sees a cognitive value in linguistic convention and it is this belief that underwrites his commitment to ordinary language.

At base, Austin’s “linguistic phenomenology” consists of using “a sharpened awareness of our words to sharpen our perception... of the phenomena.”<sup>12</sup> Even

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12. J.L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 181. All further references to this essay will be included parenthetically in the text.

though our expressions still incorporate “superstition and error and fantasy of all kinds” (“A Plea for Excuses,” 184), the history of our language provides us with a rich inheritance of useful distinctions. Austin maintains, famously, that “our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connexions they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations” (“A Plea for Excuses,” 181). One could hear in this claim a rather Burkean conservatism—language here taking the place of a settled system of manners—were it not for the fact that Austin works from the premise that the history of language forms part of a larger history of social rationalization.

Austin offers an account of this rationalization in a little bit of counter-intuitive conjectural history about halfway through *How To Do Things With Words*. He suggests that the “constative statement,” the act of naming or describing is *not*—as many philosophers have assumed—the most primitive form of language. In fact, the constative marks a late and rather sophisticated linguistic development:

[I]t seems... likely that the “pure” statement is a goal, an ideal, towards which the gradual development of science has given the impetus, as it has likewise also towards the goal of precision. (73)

As he says in an extended passage, we do not know what primitive language actually sounded like. It probably consisted of imprecations rather than of flat-out assertions. Austin suggests that as society has progressed, it has become increasingly complex. This complexity requires greater specialization. As a result, language becomes more precise, more fitted to the specific tasks that it is required to undertake. In this particular way, our usage becomes more accurate and more rational. The explicit performative is an index of this rationalization in that responds to our need for increasingly fine linguistic instruments. The same is apparently true of the constative. In Austin’s eyes, society has to come a long way before it produces utterances that are *not* warnings, prayers or commands, utterances that are only concerned with establishing facts. The intellectual abstractions that make up “statemental or constative” sentences are therefore not primitive in the slightest, but an achievement of scientific progress. In this way, “statemental” utterances represent a latter-day accom-

plishment in both language and knowledge, not the zero degree from which all language or knowledge begin.

It follows, then, that for Austin the conventions of natural language serve as valuable cognitive tools because they provide relatively up-to-date and readily serviceable distinctions and connections. He assumes that a good deal of solid knowledge inheres in our linguistic conventions, provided that we have the wit and the training to use those conventions with discretion. They are, in the jargon of another tradition, world-disclosive.

Convention is thus central to Austin's account of speech acts and to his linguistic phenomenology. The illocutionary is conventional to the extent that illocutionary verbs entail set or predictable responses and sequels. Their intention can be made explicit and that very explicitness (in a felicitous utterance at least) then prescribes or limits the kinds of sequel or response that can follow. As we have seen, the same is not true of the perlocutionary. The relative absence of conventions that could insure perlocutionary effect makes that dimension of the speech act harder to schematize. That is not to say that perlocutionary acts are completely unconventional. They are propped, after all, on the conventionality of the both the locutionary and the illocutionary. Nor is it to say that we cannot predict the perlocutionary effects of our utterances. We can reasonably expect a certain range of reactions to our utterances, though we might not always achieve our intended—or rather, our desired—goal.

As Cavell argues, if we could shore up the perlocutionary consequences of our utterances by making our intentions explicit, our speech would quickly shade over into magic. To persuade you by merely uttering the formula "I persuade you" would be tantamount to casting a spell.<sup>13</sup> (Part of the anthropological thrust of Austin's speech-act theory is to make speech a form of action without turning it into efficacious magic.) But if we were unable to predict any perlocutionary effects at all, then our conversation would shade over into solipsism or madness. Cavell puts it nicely: if the performative and the illocutionary bring the "I" primarily into the picture, the perlocutionary cedes that place to the "you."<sup>14</sup> That "you" might be skittish, but its responses are not comple-

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13. "If apparently perlocutionary acts (uttering "I deter, punish, alarm, amaze, disgust, seduce, delight, etc. you") were *eo ipso* (as Austin likes to say) to deter, punish, alarm, disgust, seduce, delight you, speech would essentially, over an unsurveyable field, be a form of magic..." Cavell, "Forward," xix.

14. Cavell, "Forward," xx; "Performative and Passionate Utterances," 179.

tely unforeseen. After all, we have developed canons of persuasion to help speakers reach their desired perlocutionary ends. If the achievement of perlocutionary effects were entirely a matter of luck, there would be no study of rhetoric at all.

The speech act necessarily summons forth both that “I” and that “you;” a speech situation will encompass both poles. All this is merely to say that the perlocutionary and the illocutionary are not really opposing speech acts, but distinct and complementary dimensions of a single complex action that Austin calls the utterance. They only seem to be separate acts because in our descriptions of the speech situation we choose to emphasize one aspect of the utterance at the expense of the other. The illocutionary dimension of the utterance tells us *how* we say things. The perlocutionary dimensions tells us *why*.

It makes sense to see *How To Do Things With Words* not as a philosophy of language, nor as a contribution to linguistics, but as a part of Austin’s attempt to come up with “a cautious, latter-day version of conduct” (“A Plea for Excuses,” 177). In other words, it is about human action and everyday ethics. *How To Do Things With Words* asks us to look at our conduct in language. It analyzes in some detail what Austin calls in the essay on excuses “the machinery of the action.” He induces us to break down the speech act into (logical) stages, which, for our convenience and perhaps to our confusion, he sees as separate “acts.”

Austin insists on taxonomies because he considers the problem of “how we decide what is the correct name for ‘the’ action that somebody did” (“A Plea for Excuses,” 179) to be one of the more vexing issues in the philosophy of action. Part of the problem of describing a speech act obviously lies with determining its force and thus its intention. But that is not the entire problem. If we are to decide what kind of speech act is being performed, we also have to decide how far we should follow its consequences. In this, the difficulty that faces our judgment of speech acts is no different than the difficulty that faces us with all other actions:

If we are asked what a person did,

we may reply either “He shot the donkey” or “He fired a gun” or “He pulled the trigger” or “He moved his trigger finger,” and all may be correct. So, to shorten the nursery story of the endeavours of the old woman to drive her pig home in

time to get her old man's supper, we may in the last resort say that the cat drove or got the pig, or made the pig get, over the stile. (107-8)

There are many different ways of describing what happens in that nursery tale. Perhaps, as Austin suggests, the cat drove the pig over the stile. But the story is about the old lady's intentions and not the cat's success with the pig. So we might do better to say that the woman got the cat to drive the pig over the stile, or, if we want to take the longest view, we can reduce the story to its nub and can say that old lady (finally!) got the pig over the stile and got her old man's supper. This description, though accurate, would beggar the story. It would elide the cat and the dog, and the rat and the cow and everything else that makes it so much fun. All description comes at a cost. It depends on what you think is important.

How we might describe an action depends on how expansive we want to be in our views and what it is that we want to assess. If we emphasize the illocutionary force of a given speech act, then we will concentrate on the relatively short time that spans the utterance's articulation and its sequel. We will end our account when the utterance achieves uptake, takes effect and is greeted with a conventional response. If we emphasize an utterance's perlocutionary aim or its effect, then we will have to take a longer view of the total speech act. We will have to canvas the ways in which the speech act encompasses both its perlocutionary intention and its "consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience" (101). Because our interest in the perlocutionary dimension of an utterance necessarily means that we cannot appeal to the explicit performative to name the act and locate its intention, we will need to engage in reconstruction—or depend on others' reconstructions—to tell us what kind of effect was aimed at. And we will need to depend on testimony—even our own reports—to gauge the extent to which that effect was achieved. More often than not, intention is secured retrospectively.<sup>15</sup>

It would seem then that our descriptions of speech acts will shift with our emphases, and that our assessments will hew to those emphases as well. Our

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15. Felman reminds that psychoanalysis teaches us that the utterance is vulnerable to disruption so that "the act cannot know what it is doing." I wonder if it *cannot* know it, or usually *does* not know it, at least beforehand. The intention that marks the illocutionary force of an utterance is often as opaque as the perlocutionary aim of an utterance, especially to the speaker. But that just means that the intentions we ascribe to any dimension of the speech act are always liable to reconstruction. Were they not, the course of psychoanalysis would truly be impossible, rather than merely unlikely. See Felman, 96.

judgments derive from the scope of our descriptions. This is not unimportant. What we look at and how we describe a speech act will determine how we assess it. To fact-check a political speech is not to judge what happens when that speech moves an audience, and Austin's account reminds us that the politician is responsible for more than just the nimbleness of her arguments or the accuracy of her facts. To put it pointedly: to assess the President's success in convincing the country to go to war is not the same as judging the acuteness of his reasons. The two are related, to be sure, but the President in this case is responsible for more than just being correct. He bears a responsibility—it is an open question just how far this responsibility should extend—for his perlocutionary aims. As Austin reminds us, appropriateness counts. The perlocutionary dimension reminds us to take this long view. It makes us ask about the reach of consequences.<sup>16</sup>

Given all this, we can again see why Austin's followers expend so little effort on the perlocutionary. The perlocutionary is messier and less visibly conventional. It requires more tact. It also smacks of the "merely subjective." The illocutionary looks—on the surface, at least—a lot more solid. It can be studied by paying attention to the distinctions that already inhere in language, distinctions that seem more objective and thus can be more readily schematized. The perlocutionary, which is harder to abstract and seems more or less inextricable from context, will inevitably turn on special circumstances. It extends farther in time and brings into play considerations that might at first seem extraneous to the illocutionary. In short: an emphasis on the perlocutionary makes the boundaries of the act all that much harder to determine.

There is also the matter of Austin's audience's interests. The insight of the early lectures in *How To Do Things With Words*—the relation of "meaning" to force—speaks to many of the preoccupations of modern philosophy in a way that the Austin's claim that our task is to analyze the utterance "in these circumstance, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions" does not. But as my handling of these issues undoubtedly shows, I am not by profession a philosopher. I was trained to read and write about literature and I come to Austin to help me think about the particular issues that concern someone who teaches novels and poems for a living.

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16. See Cavell, "Performative and Passionate Utterances," 164, 174.

While I have wanted to remain true to what I see as the unacknowledged radicalism of Austin's thought, I have purposefully resorted on a number of occasions to a more traditional language of discrimination and judgment to describe what I understand as the task that Austin sets for us. It strikes me that a due consideration of the perlocutionary dimension of speech acts returns us to both ethics and aesthetics. If that is the case, then my interests here differ from the usual literary-critical appropriation of Austin's work in the English-speaking world since the deconstructive turn of the late 1970s. That interpretation has tended to emphasize the inaugural and the dramaturgical possibilities of the performative—what it sees as the scandal of reference—and thus has ignored the perlocutionary dimension almost completely.<sup>17</sup> There are any number of reasons for this particular bias, not the least of which is the (relative) distrust that much—though certainly not all—contemporary literary criticism has shown towards effects, affects and aesthetics as a whole.<sup>18</sup> I am wagering that an interest in the perlocutionary would prompt us to take longer and broader views than we now entertain.

A reassessment of the perlocutionary should also lead us to reassess the place that Austin assigns to literature in *How To Do Things With Words*. Early on, Austin notoriously dismisses the literary uses of performatives as “not serious” and “parasitic” (22). He makes a similar claim in “Performative Utterances” where he maintains that what is said in poetry isn't “seriously meant.”<sup>19</sup>

Much has been made of this claim over the years. I wonder if in fact *too* much has not been made of these comments and not enough—except perhaps by sympathetic

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17. See Jonathan Culler, “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative,” *Poetics Today* 21.3 (2000), 503-519 and his discussion of Austin in *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015) 109-31. Literary theorists like the drama of the performative and thus tend to ignore the second half of *How To Do Things With Words*, which puts the performative in its place. This is true even in J. Hillis Miller's oddly uncharitable account of Austin in *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). As Glen Odom has noted, Miller treats perlocutionary effects as if they were performative acts. See Glen Odom, “Finding the Zumbah: An Analysis of Infelicity in *Speech Acts in Literature*,” in *Provocations to Reading: J. Hillis Miller and the Democracy to Come* ed. Barbara Cohen and Dragan Kujundzic (New ork: Fordham University Press, 2005), 269. In a different sphere, Judith Butler has been remarkably creative in her use of speech act theory. For a critique of her reading of Austin, see Geoff Boucher, “The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler,” *Parrhesia* 1 (2006), 112-41. I expressed similar misgivings, though in a Habermasian vein, in “Going Public: Habermas, Butler and Discursive Action,” *Anglistik* 5.2 (1995), 115-130.

18. My own interest in Austin and the perlocutionary owes everything to Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

19. “And I might mention that, quite differently again, we could be issuing any of these utterances, as we can issue an utterance of any kind whatsoever, in the course, for example, of acting a play or making a joke or writing a poem—in which case of course it would not be seriously meant and we shall not be able to say that we seriously performed the act concerned.” J. L. Austin, “Performative Utterances,” *Philosophical Papers*, 241.

readers such as Maximilian de Gaynesford<sup>20</sup>—has been made of Austin’s telling observation that a performative utterance will “be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem” (22; emphasis added). De Gaynesford argues, correctly I think, that Austin is not saying all that much about poetry here. He is merely observing—and this is hardly a revolutionary insight on Austin’s part—that performative utterances in poems do not take effect in the way that performative utterances might take effect in everyday life. Poetry exempts the poet from her commitments to some degree. The promise that the poet makes in a poem is not one that she is expected to keep. In literature, our performatives act “in a peculiar way.”<sup>21</sup>

Given my emphasis on conventions above, I would like to recast de Gaynesford’s point in slightly different terms. Literature is highly conventional in almost every sense, from the complications of literary form to the specialized modes of readerly attention that those complications require. Competence in literary reading requires training beyond mere linguistic mastery, and competence in literary writing requires training beyond the shibboleths of grammar and usage. Our education in literature and its conventions teaches us to accept forms of thought and expression that we would consider suspect in other parts of our lives. In other words, literature is different because it works differently and its difference is why we call it “literature” in the first place. We distinguish it from other kinds of utterance for a reason.

In literature, the performative utterance becomes “peculiarly” hollow or void because the conventions of literature supervene and trump those of everyday use. On stage, the conventions of the performative that would, in ordinary, non-literary contexts govern the force of an utterance, do not obtain or else they obtain differently. We know from our competence in literature that we are not obliged to rush out to obey an order even though Donne has delivered it. (And because we are competent readers of literature, we know that his command that we catch a falling star is impos-

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20. See Maximilian de Gaynesford, “How Not To Do Things With Words: J. L. Austin on Poetry,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51.1 (2011), 30-49. See also Christopher Ricks, “Austen’s Swink,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 61.3 (1992), 297-315.

21. This is a different claim than Searle’s assertion that fiction is made possible by “a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts to the world.” Searle is perhaps too imprecise here. He is talking about the rules of reference and therefore locutionary ‘meaning’ (sense and reference) rather than illocutionary force. In the discussion that follows, I am claiming that one of the conventions of literature is that it suspends in ‘a peculiar way’ the conventions that govern locutionary reference and illocutionary force. See John Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 67.

sible to begin with.) Something happens to the illocutionary force in literature and this “something” affects the sequel and the response that it solicits as well.

So far so good: none of this is particularly novel. Just as we know that “it is only a story,” we know that it is “only a poem.” This means that the “hollow” or “void” performatives that appear in a literary work more often than not do not serve their usual illocutionary ends. Orders are not meant to be taken as orders; promises do not take effect as promises. Instead, they are serving perlocutionary aims. Literature thus can be said to follow the loose perlocutionary formula (“By saying *x*, I was doing *y*”).<sup>22</sup> By ordering us to “Go and catch a falling star,” Donne is trying to convince us that women are naturally (and therefore inevitably) inconstant. Put most crudely, illocutionary force, which undergoes in literature what Austin calls the “sea-change of special circumstances” (22), is directed towards perlocutionary goals, such as boring, exciting, enervating, amusing, entertaining, perplexing, scaring, consoling, convincing, reassuring, horrifying, annoying or just plain moving an audience. If I am correct that literary conventions supervene (or suspend) conventional illocutionary force, then the literary, by Austin’s lights, becomes precisely the realm of the perlocutionary. Let me stake my claim as clearly as possible: against the deconstructive reading of Austin, I am suggesting that the literary is not “performative” in any scandalous way. I am suggesting that the performative in literature serves largely perlocutionary aims. I am thus dragging the literary back to pragmatics, aesthetics and everyday ethics.

If I had more space, I would try all this out on an actual literary text, but there is only time for a peroration here, and a short one at that. So here goes: in this essay, I have asked if we want to rise to Austin’s provocations. As I have really only concentrated on one of those provocations—the unacknowledged importance of the perlocutionary in his work—I will limit my final question to this. How seriously do we want to take the perlocutionary dimension of our utterances? If we do want to take it, and therefore Austin, seriously, then we must learn to measure meaning—all meaning—on our pulses.<sup>23</sup>

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22. For this “slippery” perlocutionary formula,” see *How To Do Things With Words*, 122-132.

23. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to two colleagues. Charles Jones, a linguist and keen reader of Austin ruffled up my all-too-placid interpretation of Austin and kindly pointed out my errors. Ted Kinnaman, a philosopher, also saved me from some silly mistakes. The mistakes that remain are my responsibility, not theirs.

# Little Did He Know: Cavell Absorbed by Nietzschean Esotericism

BRUCE KRAJEWSKI

If he gets the crime into the prose...

CAVELL, in response to Charles Bernstein's question about whether it matters that a philosopher or poet's criminal or morally questionable life impacts their work's relevance

Through Nietzsche, tradition has been shaken to its roots. It has completely lost its self-evident truth. We are left in this world without any authority, any direction.

LEO STRAUSS, "Religious Situation of the Present"

Continental philosophers and their followers seem to be, for the most part, untroubled by the machinations, lies, political accommodations, inactions, and ethical breaches by major figures in that tradition.<sup>1</sup> This does not lead to recognition of irony

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1. The problem stretches back to Plato and the foundational political paradigm that there are supposed to be rulers and those ruled (the *Republic*), which doesn't prevent interpretations of that work as "a democratic epic poem." See James Kastely, *The Rhetoric of Plato's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Besides the thinkers addressed in this essay (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Stanley Cavell), many others have long ignored ethico-political problems in philosophical esotericism. A short bibliography on the matter includes: Steven Ungar's *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed., Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), hereafter *GR*; Peter Brooks, "The Strange Case of Paul de Man" in *The New York Review of Books* (April 3, 2014), 44-47, an article that mostly makes excuses for de Man; Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999); Thomas Sheehan, "Emmanuel Faye: The Introduction of Fraud into Philosophy?" in *Philosophy Today*, 59.3 (Summer 2015), 367-400, an essay that thinks it sensible to ask "Is there anything at all in the 102 volumes of [Heidegger's] *Gesamtausgabe* that is not contaminated...?"; Geoff Waite, *Nietzsche's Corps/e: Aesthetics, Politics, Prophecy, Or, the Spectacular Technoculture of Everyday Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) – Tim Brennan calls Waite's book "the most informed and creative take on Nietzsche's writings in English"; Bruce Krajewski, "The Dark Side of Phronesis: Revisiting the Political Incompetence of Philosophy," *Classica*, Vol. 24, 1&2 (2011): 7-21. Accessed 16 January 2016. <http://revista.classica.org.br/classica/article/view/166/155>.

by the scholars who then recommend these major figures as guides for ethics.<sup>2</sup> Catherine Zuckert goes so far as to that “philosophical dialogue and textual hermeneutics are essentially ethical” (*GR*, 234). Cavell has chosen to declare an ethics as well. The theme of “moral perfectionism” that one can find in many of Cavell’s books, particularly the works dealing with the repositioning of Thoreau and Emerson, is part of an ongoing project to locate something “American” in concerns about “moral perfectionism” and the everyday. We even have a book about what “Christians might learn from [Cavell].”<sup>3</sup> Stanley Bates can serve as a representative of a chorus of writers who not only embrace Cavell as someone presenting an ethical viewpoint, but who also have become proponents of that viewpoint.<sup>4</sup> Bates has no hesitation in claiming on Cavell’s behalf a connection between ethics and politics: “Cavell is interested in the dimension of moral life that must be lived by an individual within a political setting, a life that a ‘good enough’ state of political justice makes possible, but that is not, and cannot be, determined by rules” (*SCE*, 42-43). Bates ends his essay by telling us that in at least one important way, Cavell is like Nietzsche, and it seems as if Bates intends that to be a positive comparison. Bates seems free of any knowledge of Nietzsche’s posthumous “political setting” in the National Socialist period.

While this essay will provide evidence that Cavell has been coopted by Nietzsche and Nietzsche’s followers, I do not expect the data or the argument to convince people, especially Cavell’s acolytes. “Facts don’t necessarily have the power to change our minds.”<sup>5</sup> In part, the problem becomes, as with Nietzsche himself, a bifurcation at fundamental levels of understanding. As Stanley Corngold and Geoff Waite have reported: “For every person who reads Nietzsche as the step-grandfather of fascism or German National Socialism’s indirect apologist, at least two embrace him as a man of the Left: whether allegedly for having *made himself* fascist in order to better fight fas-

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2. Johanna Hodge, *Heidegger and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Heidegger has even been appropriated as an environmental ethicist—see David E. Story, *Naturalizing Heidegger: His Confrontation with Nietzsche, His Contributions to Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

3. Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), x.

4. Stanley Bates, “Stanley Cavell and Ethics,” in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15-47; hereafter *SCE*. See almost all the articles in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 48.3 (Fall 2014).

5. Joe Keohane, “How Facts Backfire,” *The Boston Globe*, July 11, 2010, [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/11/how\\_facts\\_backfire](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/11/how_facts_backfire).

cism [a jaw-dropping quotation from the philosopher François Laruelle] or for his deconstruction and rejection of the moral and conceptual preconditions of fascism.”<sup>6</sup> One might take the Nietzsche case as paradigmatic for a host of thinkers, almost all of whom were, or have been, infected by Nietzsche—Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Maurice Blanchot, Paul de Man, Leo Strauss, Gadamer, Irigary, Derrida, Donna Haraway, and Judith Butler, to name a few.

My narrative is akin to a detective story. The important details of the case are not at the crime scene however. Remember, *if the crime gets into the prose*. The detective genre brings me back to Cavell. Cavell remarks in his autobiography, *Little Did I Know*, that Edgar Allan Poe’s writings make a “decisive cameo appearance” in Cavell’s own work. As Stephen Mulhall notes in his book *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary*,<sup>7</sup> Cavell undertakes some impressive close reading of Poe’s “The Imp of the Perverse” by focusing on the plethora of words in the tale that contain “imp.” The level of attention given to that tale by Cavell equals the kind of intensive hermeneutical scrutiny Cavell brought to Thoreau in *Senses of Walden*. Both Cavell and Mulhall claim that the “imp” text demonstrates how the ordinary and the everyday operate beneath human radar. The argument from both Cavell and Mulhall is that most readers (except perhaps for some gifted philosophers) do not notice the recurrence of the “imp” words in Poe’s own tale. This overlooking will serve as a framing device for what follows. The first bit of evidence lies in Cavell’s “The World as Things” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*.<sup>8</sup> That piece brings Cavell to Poe’s famous detective Dupin, and to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a narrative that allows Cavell to enter the contemporary discourse of the Posties: the postmodernists, postcolonialists, post-capitalists, and in this case, the posthumanists, whose discourse, among other things, questions distinctions between animals and humans, as if we can always tell the one from the other. More importantly, I want to dwell on Cavell’s comment about the genre of the detective story, its “function of warding off the knowledge that we do not know the origins of human plans, why things are made to happen as they do.”<sup>9</sup> On this rea-

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6. Stanley Corngold and Geoffrey Waite, “A Question of Responsibility: Nietzsche with Hölderlin at War, 1914-1946,” in *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?: On the Abuses of a Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 196, emphasis added by Corngold and Waite.

7. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

8. Cavell, “The World as Things,” in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 236-80.

9. Cavell, “The World as Things,” 247.

ding, the detective genre, even of the cozy mystery variety, is not what it seems; it operates beneath the human radar that takes the genre as following in the footsteps of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle and his followers insist that a proper tragic narrative leaves threads that come together in a knot,<sup>10</sup> in a fashion that produces a comforting etiology—things happened for a reason. Cavell's insight is that the detective genre is exactly what is non-Aristotelian, and it deceives its readers by frequently offering us detectives who seem to wrap up cases by retrospectively imposing Aristotelian knots where Poe's knots are slipknots demonstrating that crime stories expose holes in epistemology rather than producing closure that allows people/characters to move on with their everyday lives in the face of further, apparently ceaseless, criminality.<sup>11</sup>

My aim is to show, using Cavell's own trope in his section on Nietzsche in *Cities of Words*, that Cavell is a victim of Nietzschean vampirism (etymologically, absorption is being "sucked in," or less politely, being a sucker).<sup>12</sup> When it comes to Nietzsche, Cavell has it right that he missed something important. His description of the detective genre captures Nietzsche's strategy—not knowing the origin of human plans. Cavell seems unaware of Nietzsche's *Nachlass*, in which Nietzsche addresses a kind of writing that deliberately places its agenda inside what looks to be clear packaging. It's a version of clear air turbulence. You don't see the danger until you have flown into it and become its victim. We don't have interpretive radar for that. Note how Cavell emphasizes Nietzsche's "clarity" and plainness in his defense of Nietzsche against Rawls in the section from *Cities of Words*.

Here is my thesis, since some readers might feel uncomfortable without such an announcement. While Cavell has applied "logical esotericism" to his understanding of Wittgenstein,<sup>13</sup> Cavell fails to read Nietzsche as well as Heidegger as esoteri-

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10. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1455b24. See the Gerald Else English translation of the *Poetics*.

11. See Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991), especially the chapter "Two Ways to Avoid the Real of Desire."

12. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). The telling section begins on 219, in which Cavell objects to John Rawls's reading of Nietzsche as non-egalitarian. Cavell wants Nietzsche in the democratic camp, despite evidence to the contrary. Cavell notices that when Nietzsche makes certain claims about human beings in general, those claims can "sound bad," but Cavell presses on to make Nietzsche's case for *Übermenschen*, all the while denying that Nietzsche believes that ruling others is only for a special few.

13. Waite, *Nietzsche's Corps/e*, 199-205. "Just as Cavell's 'esoteric' does not take seriously enough the possibility of *intentional manipulation by authors at the level of textual production*, so also it does not suggest a way of analyzing texts appropriately *at the level of consumption*. This failure is unacceptable in dealing with Nietzsche/anism" (201).

cists, and thus falls victim to their pernicious ideology. Nietzsche in his *Nachlass* had proclaimed: “My writings should be so obscure [dark] and incomprehensible!” (*Meine Schriften sollen so dunkel und unverständlich sein!*).<sup>14</sup> In *Cities of Words*, Cavell portrays Nietzsche as a champion of a kind of independence, a methodology for “becoming who you are,” à la Charlotte in *Now, Voyager*. It is a crucial hermeneutical problem that Cavell takes Nietzsche at face value, despite ample evidence, which you can find, among other places in Geoff Waite’s book *Nietzsche’s Corps/e*, that Nietzsche, like Heidegger and Wittgenstein, kept the real, anti-egalitarian agenda off the main stage.

If Cavell read the *Nachlass*, perhaps he could have read this 1884 Nietzsche passage plainly, and come to a different conclusion about Nietzsche’s intentions: “First Basic Law: no consideration for numbers: the masses. The suffering and unhappy concern us little—only the foremost and most successful exemplars, so that they don’t get short shrift out of consideration for the ill-bred ones (i.e., the masses). Destruction of the ill-bred—to this aim one must emancipate oneself from previous morality.”<sup>15</sup>

Hardly anyone, including philosophers who make a living teaching and publishing about Wittgenstein, read Wittgenstein’s Koder diaries or the *Geheime Tagebücher*, secret diaries, which have yet to be translated into English. Here was the situation in the early 1990s, as described by Jaako Hintikka, a well known Wittgenstein scholar: Wittgenstein made double use of his notebooks. Besides using them to jot down philosophical ideas as they occurred to him, he used the very same notebooks to record other observations. In order to prevent any casual reader from having access to his private thoughts, he used a code to record the private matters. The coded passages have been deciphered. A pirated edition of the coded parts of the 1914-16 notebooks was published in 1985 in the magazine *Saber* in Barcelona.<sup>16</sup> Much as Heidegger’s family has kept a tight rein on how Heidegger’s works have been published, Wittgenstein’s literary executors restrict access to the coded passages. They are supposed to be censored from the microfilms distributed by the Cornell University Library, though at

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14. Nietzsche to Carl Gersdorff, 1 April 1874; *Kritische Gesamtausgabe Briefwechsel*, 2/3 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1978), 215.

15. Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Nachgelassene Fragmente*, Vol. 7/2, Walter de Gruyter, 1974, 71. Hereafter as *KGA*.

16. See *Wittgenstein in Florida*, ed. Jaako Hintikka (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1991).

least one major university library received an unexpurgated copy. This is the kind of situation in which close reading is useless. You cannot read closely what is not available, but people can do their homework. That is, with a little digging, it's possible to learn about the secret writings of these philosophers. The North American audience for this essay is familiar with the TMZ-like electricity that has taken place in the Heideggerian world of scholars over the publication of the *Schwarze Hefte*, the "Black Notebooks," which were "under seal" until their publication in German in 2014. The release of those notebooks caused the chair of the Martin Heidegger Society, Günter Figal, to resign his position this time last year. Günter Figal's epiphany that one of his favorite authors had written numerous passages that reek of anti-Semitism, late in coming as that *Aha-Erlebnis* was, lends credence to a view that foregrounding the esotericism in Continental philosophy is not fruitless. Others might also be saved from thinking that Nietzsche, Cavell, Heidegger and company are misread leftists, or benign conservatives, or truly wretched beings whose philosophies must be bracketed from their personal lives, as if the personal lives and the philosophies were not, in these particular cases, reinforcing. You are also familiar with the rhetorical move of claiming certain thinkers have early and late phases, and one phase needs to be ignored while another elevated. Those versed in the scholarship on Wittgenstein will recognize that move as a commonplace. This is the same tactic Cavell uses with Nietzsche to ease Cavell's conscience, I suppose, about the obvious impact that a word like *Übermensch* has on a post-Hitlerian audience. Cavell prefers to think of the Nietzsche of *Beyond Good and Evil* as the untainted Nietzsche, despite claims by Nietzsche scholars like James Porter in his *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, who writes: "What is less well recognized is that in his later writings Nietzsche continues to treat the same problems that he had treated in his earlier writings, and often in the same ways."<sup>17</sup>

Porter's claim works in a world of close reading, when the important materials are there for the reading. The claim becomes problematic in the world of esotericism. The context of philosophical esotericism in the West, connected to the thinkers already mentioned, is now better known, thanks to the work of Arthur Melzer.<sup>18</sup> In Ber-

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17. James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2.

18. Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

nard Yack's review of Melzer's 2014 book, Yack writes: "Melzer amass[es] an enormous amount of testimony, testimony from major figures in every age from Classical Antiquity through the Renaissance and Enlightenment, confirming knowledge and approval of these ways of esoteric means of communicating philosophic ideas. Esoteric writing, this testimony makes clear, was no secret. It was a familiar and unremarkable feature of the Western philosopher's intellectual landscape right up to the beginning of the 19th century."<sup>19</sup> Yack is a bit flippant with the acceptance of esotericism among philosophers and academics. Yack makes it seem as if what Melzer offers is uncontroversial, but a great deal is at stake. Plato's *Seventh Letter* might serve as an example. Plato's letter is a text unimportant to Cavell's thinking, though Cavell has a great deal to say about Plato's *Republic*. As you will recall it's in the *Seventh Letter* that Plato makes the claim that philosophers would be better off not making public their real ideas. It is too dangerous, and he obviously must have the fate of Socrates in mind in making that statement. Yet, classicists and philosophers are still working to discredit the *Seventh Letter* as an authentic Platonic text. In a 2015 book entitled *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* by Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, the authors attempt a weak case in that direction, one easily dismantled by Charles Kahn.<sup>20</sup> Plato's explanation of the motivation of philosophical esotericism in the *Seventh Letter* was one of the motivations for Leo Strauss's famous work *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, one of the key texts in thinking through the political implications of the ongoing history of esotericism, close reading, and cryptography.<sup>21</sup>

On to the serious business about Cavell. Cavell admits in his autobiography *Little Did I Know* that Cavell thinks Heidegger's dalliance with National Socialism was "impermanent," and does not seem to link it to Heidegger's extended interest in Nietzsche nor Heidegger's propagation of Nietzsche's work in Heidegger's famous two-volume study of Nietzsche, published in 1961, but based on earlier lectures which arose out of Heidegger's so-called discovery of Nietzsche sometime between 1927 and

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19. Bernard Yack, "Review of Arthur Melzer's *Philosophy Between the Lines*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, October 27, 2014. Accessed January 16, 2016. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/53333-philosophy-between-the-lines-the-lost-history-of-esoteric-writing>.

20. Charles Kahn, "Review of Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, November 9, 2015. Accessed January 16, 2016. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/62135-the-pseudo-platonic-seventh-letter>.

21. Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; originally published in 1952).

1933.<sup>22</sup> As early as 1921, Heidegger had written to Karl Jaspers about forming an “invisible community” of those interested in the philosophical topics occupying Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes that “the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the force of the most elemental in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep it from common understanding.”<sup>23</sup> This is of a piece with Nietzsche’s comments in his *Nachlass* that his works are not meant for common, ignorant people.

In a recent brief and elliptical discussion, the poet Charles Bernstein has with Cavell about Heidegger and National Socialism, Cavell is at pains to suggest that he would think differently about Heidegger, had Heidegger “actually laid hands on people.” This misses the point of esoteric politics bent on war. One has others put hands on people, while one’s own hands remain seemingly unstained. It’s a version of drone wars at which philosophers excel. Cavell seems to have no idea of what it means for Nietzsche to have described himself as “dynamite,” and to have predicted his own rise from the dead: “To be ignited in 300 years—that is my desire for fame.”<sup>24</sup> A contemporary analogue to this is playing out in Germany at the moment, with the success of a book about the return of Hitler by Timur Vermes and the subsequent film entitled *Er ist Da Wieder (Look Who’s Back)*.<sup>25</sup>

The evidence of Cavell’s questionable moral reading—by a man who has labeled his own work as instructions in the moral life, and who claims that Nietzsche and Heidegger and others deserve our attention as readers and students, and should adjust our moral lives—rests, if nowhere else, in a few minutes of the podcast with his former student Charles Bernstein. I have transcribed the relevant section.

BERNSTEIN: Do you think that a philosopher’s or a poet’s work should be judged by their moral conduct in the world or by the work itself? Does the bad things that people do—I mean, there are many famous examples that will immediately come to your mind as I say that [laughter from CB]—does it negate the work?

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22. Allan Megill, “Martin Heidegger and the Metapolitics of Crisis,” in *What Should Political Theory Be Now?*, ed. John Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 264-304.

23. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1979), 220; *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 262.

24. *KGA VII/1*, 195.

25. Timur Vermes, *Look Who’s Back*, trans. Jamie Bulloch (New York: MacLehose Press, 2015; first published in German in 2012).

CAVELL: Well, I mean, it would have to be a pretty bad life to negate the work. I mean, if you're a child molester, I'm not going to read your writing.

BERNSTEIN: Well, That would be a good example. Those aren't the paradigmatic examples, but why not? Why couldn't someone be a child molester? And would it make a difference whether it was a poet or philosopher? Or an artist or a philosopher?

CAVELL: That's a really very good question.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, that's my question for you. It's a real question I have wanted to ask you, because I figure you thought about it in some way.

CAVELL: Well, not enough. Not enough. I am willing to go *very far* with the voice that's actually in the words, in the text. But what it brings to mind is how utterly it depends on both sides of that—what the criminal aspect of the writer has been.

BERNSTEIN: So it's the particular nature of the crime?

CAVELL: It's the nature of the crime, and it's the nature of the prose, both. If he gets the crime into the prose, and has something important to say about it, and isn't trying to polish it over, or [can't make out] an excuse about it, or something, then I might feel moved by it.

BERNSTEIN: And would it make a difference if it was philosophy? That we would want a philosopher or could somehow not take seriously the work of a philosopher who...

CAVELL: I think the aroma of a bad life, if it's bad enough, is going to be there, and if you know about it, you're going to have to deal with it.

BERNSTEIN: It's hard to see with a poet, although people would say that. If you write some poem that's a wonderful poem that exists, it can't really be compromised, but many people wouldn't say that. So, I mean, the poetry example most famous is [Ezra] Pound.

CAVELL: Well, yes, that's a good instance. And it's a problem. And sometimes you get caught up in the problem, and sometimes you leave the crap behind, and you are in the mood, you're in the poem. But I don't think there's a formula for this.

BERNSTEIN: And the other one that I'm obviously leading to, because it's a person you write about, is Heidegger.

CAVELL: Yeah. That's a very good instance.

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, of course. Your relation to Heidegger is interesting. He seems fundamental to you. At some point in your work, but at the same time, *not*—can I put that—you sort of don't want to turn away from Heidegger it seems to me in the writing. But I don't actually know what at this point in your life—you certainly haven't been writing about it recently, you think about that. Because I think even the thinking about what the relationship to Heidegger's work as the rector was has for many people contaminated the ability to read the later Heidegger (*Poetry, Language, and Truth*) or certainly *Being and Time*—There's something about that Nazi, Aryan supremacy—just because you put the two things together, you all of a sudden start to see it there. If you want to. Once you put that on there, then all of a sudden you project that in. I mean, is that unfair? Is that accurate to the work? Is it fair to philosophy, or the philosophy that is important to you, because there are things that are said there that are needed?

CAVELL: I am just going to say it depends. If he had been a murderer, I mean, actually laid hands on...

Cavell says he has thought about these ethico-political matters, but “not enough.” Bernstein expected otherwise. Cavell's response to Bernstein is in a special cadence in the podcast. There is a deliberateness in delivery leading up to the “it depends.” Cavell introduces contingencies and conditional clauses. “If he gets the crime into the prose” and “if he actually laid hands on.” Some boundary exists, and once the boundary is crossed (when the crime enters the prose, and when the hands are laid), then it's possible to make judgments and larger ethical decisions, perhaps as dramatic as Cavell's statement about the writings of a child molester. On this line of thinking, a threshold must be achieved, establishing the groundwork for an ethical position, a

commission of an act that leaves unspoken whether ethical thought also needs to address acts of omission. Time for a closer look at “it depends.”

Cavell’s “it depends” functions as a refuge for those who do not want to deal with the dark side of Heidegger, or Nietzsche, or Gadamer, or Blanchot, or de Man.<sup>26</sup> It can reach absurd levels, such as Sheehan’s reliance on exact numbers that get us specifically nowhere. In Sheehan’s criticism of Faye, and doubtless it’s as much a personal criticism as a defense of Heidegger, Sheehan writes: “*Being and Time* is a thickly argued book comprised of 497 pages and 143,000 words in the German. But despite the magnitude of his claim, Faye devotes only 1550 words to his analysis of Heidegger’s magnum opus – while in the process passing a damning judgment on the entire book” (*EF*, 379).<sup>27</sup> Would 1,551 words of analysis have been better, more to the point, justified the “damning judgment”? The number of words to reach the important threshold (for Sheehan to accept Faye’s judgment) is never mentioned. On the other side, someone like Jean Grondin, official biographer for Gadamer, wants to claim that because Gadamer had *some* Jewish friends during the National Socialist period, that fact serves as exculpatory evidence that he could not be an anti-Semite, or someone who accommodated National Socialism. For Cavell, Heidegger must have actually laid hands on... on whom? The presupposition must be that we lack an episode reporting Heidegger strangling one of his Jewish colleagues or pushing a concentration camp prisoner into an oven or punching an Allied soldier in the face during a battle. There’s *that* kind of “laying hands on.” Would that be the necessary scenario for Cavell, the man ready to stop reading the writing of child molesters, to acknowledge the stain that runs across Heidegger’s works? On the other hand, we also lack episodes in which Heidegger actually laid hands on any National Socialist or Nazi sympathizer who might have been involved in harming others—if “laying hands on” is the decisive criterion. But it is not, any more than one would make ethical judgments about a sniper using the “actually laid hands on” line of defense, since “laying hands on” could not be

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26. Waite makes the case that misunderstanding National Socialism heightens the ethical interest in the particular philosophers and others who failed to resist, collaborated, accommodated themselves to it, saved themselves from it, but occludes access to the larger picture of capitalism as such. National Socialism was capitalism in crisis, but the defeat of the Nazis militarily did not mean an end to capitalism. National Socialism was one phase of capitalism (see GR, 279-81). See also Peter R. Sinclair, “Fascism and Crisis in Capitalist Society” in *New German Critique* 9 (Autumn 1976), 87-112.

27. While pummeling Faye’s scholarship, Sheehan ignores that others besides Faye have made the case that *Being and Time* is politically benign, such as Johannes Fritsche, *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

taken literally by Bernstein or other listeners to the podcast with Cavell. In the German Criminal Code prior to 1968, anyone who was convicted as an accomplice to a crime was subject to the same penalty as the perpetrator.<sup>28</sup> Cavell must have been thinking about Heidegger in a different legal frame in response to Bernstein's question, a question that apparently has not been troubling Cavell or his followers, especially the ones who want to foist a Cavellian ethics upon us.

In the "actually laid hands on" defense of Heidegger, Cavell offers a version of the Doubting Thomas narrative. The wound/crime is real, only if one can touch it, put hands on it, through it. Elsewhere, such as in his interpretation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," Cavell seems to warn his readers against such literal-minded skepticism, while suggesting that a skeptical crisis can spread throughout a community, and looks like a massive reconsideration of reality itself (a situation that seems necessary for Cavell and his acolytes). Might some listeners to the podcast say that Cavell is giving the proverbial "benefit of the doubt" in the absence of overwhelming empirical evidence of hands being laid on someone? Must we have overwhelming empirical evidence of bloody acts by Heidegger before we wonder about Heidegger's ethics, as Charles Bernstein and Günter Figal have? We can start questioning the motives of those committed to esotericism,<sup>29</sup> and to someone apparently enthralled by Nietzsche, a writer who planned on having posthumous effects, which gives his writings more relevance for readers now. In Lacanian terms, Nietzsche fashioned himself into a structuring absence ("to be ignited in 300 years"). In his own writings, Cavell follows the lead of other philosophers, like Kant, who suggest a continual probing of one's own motives.<sup>30</sup> It seems time for students and followers of Cavell to follow Bernstein's example in questioning Cavell, who admits he has not thought enough about these matters related to Heidegger and Nietzsche. If Cavell has not thought enough about it, they certainly have not.

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28. Lawrence Raful, Herbert Reginbogin, and Christoph Safferling (eds.), *The Nuremberg Trials: International Criminal Law since 1945* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 211.

29. While the evidence appears much earlier, one cannot miss Heidegger's focus on the concealed/unconcealed dichotomy in writing in his "The Provenance of Art and the Destination of Thought" in the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 44.2 (May 2013), 119-128; Heidegger writes, "unconcealment is everywhere in need of concealment" (127).

30. See Charles Warren, "Philosophy/literature/criticism/film" in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, literature and criticism*, eds. James Loxley and Andrew Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 184.

## A Brief Encounter with Cavell in Amsterdam

DARKO ŠTRAJN

Stanley Cavell was hardly known to me before I met him in person. And then I was genuinely astounded about how, until then in my own pursuits in philosophy to come to terms with the (in)famous discrepancies and differences between the Continental and Anglo-American philosophy, I had somehow managed to miss his contributions. Besides, I found that even before my brief encounter with Cavell I had shared another interest with him not only in cinema, but also in the specific cinematic genre of melodrama. Unfortunately, I could not refer to Cavell's "Melodrama of the Unknown Woman" in my own book on melodrama, written in the little-known Slovenian language in 1988.<sup>1</sup> Cavell actually published the chapter on psychoanalysis and drama already in 1989, but the book *Contesting Tears*, of which this chapter was made part of, wasn't published before 1996.

Anyway, I met Cavell when he visited the University of Amsterdam in 1998, when I happened to be an "academic visitor" for a few months there on a grant for scholars from the countries aspiring to enter the European Union. It must have been in April of that year, when Professor Mieke Bal at Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (graduate school attached to the University of Amsterdam) announced the visit of professor Stanley Cavell—"known as a representative of skepticism"—in the frame of a program of "Spinoza lectures." Subsequently, Cavell took part in three days of seminar for the faculty at the Department of Philosophy, dedicated to his seminal book *The Claim of Reason*. Of course, I remember it being a great intellectual pleasure to have had the privilege to share with some twenty or so other participants of the conference. However, since I have read the book more thoroughly only after the conference, I cannot really recall in any detail what Cavell and the members of his lively

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1. In those still pre-digital times it took some time for getting the text ready to print and so my book was finally published in 1989. Darko Štrajn, *Melodrama: žanr sreče in obupa* [*Melodrama, the Genre of Happiness and Despair*] (Ljubljana: Revija Ekran, Imago, 1989.)

and active audience imparted. The text of “*The Claim*,” which I read with great interest after I returned home from Amsterdam—apart from two or three chapters that I read immediately before the seminar—later “over-scribed” and, hence, besieged the spoken words from that conference in my memory.

Afterwards Cavell also gave a lecture for a much larger audience of at least three hundred listeners at the University’s special place auditorium of the “Lutherse Kerk.”<sup>2</sup> I shall never forget Cavell’s simultaneously scholarly and seriously frivolous twist from this lecture, which was accompanied by the clip of a sequence from Minelli’s film *The Band Wagon* (1953). Of course, I cannot quote word for word what Cavell said in that lecture, but I definitely remember the line of his thinking and the rhetoric, which as they were, aimed to cause an effect of illuminating astonishment among the sophisticated listeners. When he addressed the above-mentioned relationship between the Anglo-American and Continental philosophy, he pointedly raised a question of the content of thought based on these two distinctive paradigms. Acknowledging a large scope of thought by such philosophers as Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and so on, Cavell asked (himself) whether it was possible at all that such dimensions of thought as in their philosophies were not reflected in the Anglo-American culture. The answer to his question elicited at first some giggling and appreciative laughter an instant later, when the lecturer’s point got fully assimilated in our comprehension. Needless to say, what continental philosophers had devised in their work was not absent from Anglo-American culture; the ideas that the empiricist, positivist and analytical philosophies—and, moreover, not all of them strictly “geographically” American or British—did not really considered, were “given voice” in literature, in Shakespeare’s tragedies, in writings of transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, later in the novels of Henry James, and in Hollywood films. To illustrate his point, Cavell explicitly compared Hegel to Fred Astaire, at once condensing in his words the “master—slave” dialectics, the relationship of concepts of the particular vs. the idea of totality or the whole, American history, questions of aesthetics, economy and metaphysics. So, as it was expressed in Cavell’s slightly “provocative” tone, dancing and singing on film are acts of thinking and performing philosophy. Undoubtedly, a number of themes, which were touched upon

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2. This is in fact a church building, now for quite some time turned into the University’s special place for important lectures, defenses of theses, academic celebrations of all kinds, and so forth.

in the lecture in a rather condensed and rhetorically accentuated manner, could be found throughout Cavell's works, but rarely in such a straight, clear-cut and revealing form. To illustrate the point, let me just take an example from his treatise on Thoreau's *Walden*.<sup>3</sup> He claims that *Walden* was "written in a pre-philosophical moment of its culture," when also a range of different disciplines from philosophy to politics had not been separated; and then Cavell proceeds: "This pre-philosophical moment, measured in American time, occurred before the German and the English traditions of philosophy began to shun one another, and I hoped that if I could show *Walden* to cross my own philosophical site, I might thereby re-enact an old exchange between these traditions." I cannot go further than this in this short piece. Allow me just to mention that after making this point, he embarks on a dialogue with Derrida and Levi-Strauss regarding the "idea of literature as *écriture*."<sup>4</sup> I dare to say that Cavell's enormous contribution, which through the concept of (Descartes-based) skepticism brought up a new vision of intellectual dialogue, still needs to resonate in maybe some yet unconceivable space or framework of thinking. Cavell's writing touches upon not only relationships between different "systems" (or in some articulations "paradigms") of philosophy, but also between different levels, forms of expression and genres, of which his expanding of Austin's concept of the ordinary language philosophy into the broader "philosophy of the ordinary" is just one explicit case. His works—no matter how much they are maybe seen as such in some "unfriendly" American philosophies—cannot be read at all as an advocacy of the "European" philosophy against the "American" one, but strictly as an affirmation of mutual recognition, exchange and suggestion of an eye-opening intellectual (however not necessarily only sophisticated) experience. When he discusses positivism and deconstruction, he points out that "the appeal to mathematical logic for its algorithmic value is an appeal to its sublime inscriptional powers (of alignment, rewriting, iteration, substitution, and so on)."<sup>5</sup> Much such discernment clearly bears witness to his deep philosophical impartiality regarding the gap between two cultures and two "logics" of thought. On the other hand, his great book on Wittgenstein is in many respects a case *for* positivist philosophy in the areas of its strength.

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3. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), xiv.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 83.

Cavell undoubtedly anticipated some currents and new areas of thinking, which could be now clearly illustrated in a number of “post-post-structuralist” philosophies and, even more, in a variety of new combinations of the interdisciplinary humanities. After all, the publication of his first book on film (*The World Viewed*, 1971) for almost a decade preceded the renowned Deleuze’s *Image-mouvement* (1981), let alone more recent contributions of “filmosophy.”

As for the detail of associating Astaire to philosophy, I found out that before 1998 Cavell mentioned Astaire and his dancing just more or less sporadically. Therefore, his point in the lecture at the “Lutherse Kerk” could not have resulted from his previous work. What did sound as a bit frivolous cerebral “arrogation,” became only a few years later a well-founded philosophical analysis, within which Astaire is brought into a dialogue with, among others, Immanuel Kant. Pointing out the emphases on the reading of individual works of art, Cavell says: “I think of this emphasis as letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it, and I regard that attention as a way of testing whether the time is past in which taking seriously the philosophical bearing of a particular work of art can be a measure of the seriousness of philosophy.”<sup>6</sup>

But let me come back to where I began. My personal encounter with Cavell exceeded only my presence among the audience. One day after the seminar on “*The Claim*” a small group of five or six went for a coffee outside a bar near new Amsterdam city hall. There I had a chance to talk to Cavell directly and I caught his interest by telling him that I wrote my dissertation on Johann G. Fichte, and that I found out that some American colleagues had never heard of him. He then explained that even he himself in his formal philosophy curriculum had hardly heard of even Descartes, let alone all notorious German philosophers. We exchanged some views on the then already gone attempts of a dialogue between post-structuralism and some Anglo-American philosophies, which seemed to share somewhat similar conceptual attitude towards language, and in the end we were grateful of the coincidence, which brought about Ludwig Wittgenstein.

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6. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 10.

# Cynical Self-Doubt and the Grounds of Sympathy: A Response to Stanley Cavell's "Knowing and Acknowledging"

SAM CARDOEN

## The Goals of "Knowing and Acknowledging"

The foundational essay of Stanley Cavell's oeuvre, "Knowing and Acknowledging," prepares the author's continued interest in sceptical doubt about the existence of other minds as well as his specific approach to this particular philosophical problem. One useful way of approaching "Knowing and Acknowledging" is to suggest that it addresses the other minds sceptic so as to excavate alongside him the underlying ground from which his doubt about the existence of other minds emerges. Cavell, in other words, appears to compose his argument in such a way as to lead the sceptic along a series of steps that demonstrate that his sceptical doubt does not simply exist as a self-contained or self-standing problem. In doing so, Cavell traces the emergence of sceptical doubt about other minds to a specific anxiety about our reliance on expressions of sympathy as a way of responding to the suffering of others. Cavell argues that the sceptic subsequently intellectualizes this anxiety into sceptical doubt. Cavell explicitly does not seek to refute the sceptic; he even accepts that the sceptic's intellectual doubt is, in its way, valid. For Cavell, to try to straightforwardly refute sceptical doubt is simply to accept the terms on which it presents itself, and thereby to extend the sceptic's view. Instead, Cavell tries to get the sceptic to a point where he will regard the nature, and the origins, of his doubt differently than he did before.

Cavell does not disparage the sceptic's position of doubt,<sup>1</sup> nor does he want to refute it. His angle of approach is to sympathetically inhabit the sceptical position,

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1. See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 239, 249.

even as he questions the role which it plays for the sceptic, which he does by suggesting that the sceptic's doubt is in fact an intellectualization. By taking this double position, in which he both sympathetically inhabits and inspects the sceptic's position, Cavell seeks to gain the sceptic's trust to alter his self-understanding. Still, Cavell's claim to insight into the origin of the sceptic's doubt is not meant as a presumptuous claim to intellectual superiority. Rather, Cavell recognizes a sense of limitation which the sceptic intellectualizes. It is the sceptic who claims a superior position by reinterpreting an unsettling awareness of his finitude—of his ineluctable separateness from others, which he regards as a form of powerlessness—into a doubt about the validity of our belief in the existence of other minds. He does so by reinterpreting ordinary language-games in such a way as to arrive at sceptical doubt.

For Cavell, it is an initial dissatisfaction with our reliance on expressions of sympathy as a way of responding to the suffering of others which specifically is to be understood as the underlying ground from which sceptical doubt will emerge. The central purpose of "Knowing and Acknowledging" is to restore the sceptic to the dimension of ordinary interaction which his sceptical doubt, and its underlying cause, have left unsettled. This goal also explains Cavell's sympathetic approach to the sceptic's position: by relying on the power of penetration of the sympathetic imagination, Cavell intends to demonstrate that it allows him to better understand the sceptic than the sceptic understands himself. This is meant to indicate to the sceptic that his specific anxiety about sympathy, which Cavell interprets as the underlying cause from which his doubt arose, is unfounded. He so enables the sceptic to return to the expression of sympathy as a way of responding to others who suffer.

### **This Paper: Its Goals**

This paper constitutes a critical reply to the line of argument Cavell develops in "Knowing and Acknowledging." The above introduction, while rudimentary and all too brief, should nevertheless suffice for the purpose of listing the goals of this paper:

(1) The first goal of this paper is to argue that it is possible to articulate an alternate way of portraying the specific anxiety about sympathy which underlies the

emergence of sceptical doubt about other minds. I will repurpose an early essay of Cavell's on Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* to help render this alternate account. Cavell's strategy is to prove to the sceptic, as he conceives him, the *power*, or the *depth of penetration*, of the sympathetic imagination. The sceptic, as I conceive of him, requires something altogether different. He requires a demonstration of the *legitimacy* of our reliance on expressions of sympathy. He is haunted by a sense that, in relying on expressions of sympathy, we only truly serve ourselves, not others. This anxiety is the reason he believes our reliance on sympathy to be illegitimate, to be without grounds. The problem, as my sceptic sees it, is not that we cannot rely on sympathy to provide us with adequate insight into the other's experiences; it is instead that expressions of sympathy are unwittingly deceptive, self-serving ploys that do little to relieve the other's suffering: sympathy allows us to ignore the other's suffering. In my reading, this anxiety is what gives rise to the problem of other minds.

(2) As such, I uncover an internal connection between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt. I should briefly explain, then, what I mean here by the notion of cynical self-doubt, the description of which I have borrowed from South African novelist J.M. Coetzee's critical writings.<sup>2</sup> For Coetzee, a person who is struck by cynical self-doubt is convinced that he is always inevitably self-interested, even when he seeks not to be self-interested. Nevertheless, he can only know in an abstract sense that he, and all of the common or established practices he is likely to follow, are ruled by self-interest. He cannot pinpoint the exact or final nature of his self-interest or the particular shape which it takes in particular instances. That is to say, any sincere attempt to give a truthful account of himself, his motives, of his actions or of his practices is itself inevitably biased; and any attempt to uncover the underlying bias so as to eliminate it must in turn be biased, so that he is compelled to submit his sense of self to an endless process of self-revision. While an

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2. We can find Coetzee's description in his comments on the problem of truth in autobiography. In *Doubling the Point*, a collection of essays with accompanying interviews which was published in 1991, Coetzee discusses (391-392) his 1985 essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky." This essay was itself more or less coincided with a lecture which Coetzee gave at the University of Cape Town in 1984, with the title *Truth in Autobiography*, which helpfully summarizes Coetzee's sense of the problem. In short, in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee describes himself as one who is stuck, or who moves, between a position of cynicism and a position of grace; the cynic believes autobiography can only lead to a self-interested account of oneself, whereas the person who aspires to grace wishes to believe that we can, finally, see ourselves clearly. In his critical remarks from 1984 and 1985, Coetzee links this issue to a tradition of writers which most notably includes Fyodor Dostoevsky.

orthodox reading of “Knowing and Acknowledging” does not help clarify our sense of an internal link between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt, Cavell’s essay on Beckett’s *Endgame* does lend itself to this approach. By portraying the anxiety underlying sceptical doubt about the existence of other minds in an alternate fashion, I uncover the link between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt, and I use Cavell’s views of Beckett to take this step.

(3) I also devise a tailored way of defusing the specific form of anxiety about sympathy which, in my alternate account, underlies both the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt. In doing so, I try to follow in the footsteps of Cavell’s attempt to sympathetically imagine himself into the position of the other minds sceptic so as to alter his self-understanding. The most important goal of this paper is, much like Cavell’s goal, a return to sympathy as a proper response to the suffering of others. But I propose an alternate way in which we can secure this return to sympathy, since I conceive the anxiety that underlies its loss altogether differently.

(4) Finally, in relation to the critical study of Cavell’s works, I would briefly suggest that this paper, if only implicitly, presents a counterweight to the tendency to accept (Cavell’s essays on) Shakespeare as the main literary prism through which to approach his philosophical thought on the subject of sceptical doubt. Typically, this critical approach is one that, to my mind, all too comfortably accepts Cavell’s use of a conceptual dichotomy between avoidance and acknowledgment as a tool to interpret scepticism.<sup>3</sup> Avoidance is the underlying condition from which scepticism as a failure to acknowledge arises. Cavell gleans this dichotomy from his reading of Shakespeare. I will present the cynical sceptic as one whose doubt begins in a desire to possess the

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3. See, for instance, Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For Mulhall, the discovery of the actual role of criteria in our lives goes alongside “the discovery of our own responsibility—our responsiveness—in the existence of others” (114). We must realise that “[t]he knowledge which such criteria [of pain] confer imposes a call on [us]—for comfort, succor, healing; [a call by the other] for a response which helps to assuage the pain or to acknowledge that the pain is unassuageable” (110). The sceptic is “right to suspect that there is more to knowing that someone is in pain than the mere satisfaction of criteria.” “But by concluding from this that we cannot reach the inner life of others, by thinking that a human’s behaviour leaves us uncertain of the nature and even the existence of her inner life, the sceptic himself refuses the responsibility for those criteria,” since he fails to depend on criteria of pain to inform and guide his discriminate responses to the other’s expressions of need and pain. Mulhall’s reading, which is faithful to Cavell and faithfully adopts his understanding of the sceptic’s failure to acknowledge or avoidance, clashes with the alternative line of thinking I propose in this paper, in which the sceptic, from the very start, wants to be absolutely responsive to the other so as to bring an absolute form of relief to the other. This reading implies that the sceptic, as I see him, is one who cannot accept the fact that another’s pain may be “unassuageable.”

other's suffering. The cynical sceptic, then, is not readily convinced by the idea that his sceptical position is initially one of avoidance; instead his desire to be *absolutely responsive* is what eventually leads him to a form of paralysis, and so into avoidance. In this approach to other minds scepticism, I conceive of avoidance as the end result of a wish to be absolutely responsive, but never simply as the starting point of doubt.

### **“Knowing and Acknowledging” on the Problem of Other Minds**

In “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Cavell, following in the footsteps of Wittgenstein, relates the problem of other minds to the problem of suffering. The other minds sceptic suggests that we cannot know with certainty that there are in fact other minds, because we are confined to the other's expressions, in this case of suffering, in establishing that he is a sentient being. Since we cannot guarantee that his expressions of suffering are not in reality produced by a sophisticated robot or by an automaton, we cannot be sure that an actual other mind exhibits them, and, thus, that other minds do in fact exist. For us to know with certainty that there are in fact other minds, we would have to be able to experience the exact *instance* of suffering which the other experiences as *he* experiences it. That is, to show beyond any doubt that the other exists, we would need to have a direct and unmediated access to *his* perspective. This position itself can be restated as saying that we would need to be able to be the other to rebut sceptical doubt. The sceptic argues that, since we cannot be the other and experience those specific instances of experience he lives as a separate being, we cannot possibly establish beyond all doubt that the other exists.

Following Wittgenstein, Cavell tackles the sceptic's position by suggesting that the sceptic's problem crosses two distinct language-games. In a first language-game, we express sympathy as a form of acknowledgment of the other. If I say “I know how you feel” or “I know you are in pain,” I ordinarily mean to express sympathy, and in doing so, I show that your suffering affects me. In a second language-game, I rely on the phrase “I know” to claim certainty, or a privileged position that allows me to make a claim to knowledge. If we are in a museum and I claim that we are looking at an early Picasso, you may try to dispute my claim. You may try to argue that I am

wrong and that we are in fact looking at a late Picasso. If I go on to dispute your claim, you can try to end our argument by saying that you “know” that this is a late work of Picasso, since you wrote a dissertation on the evolution of style in Picasso’s oeuvre. Given your background in art history, you are in a privileged position to stake your claim and correct my error. I am likely to accept your claim, unless I happen to know that you are making up things and in reality know little about Picasso’s oeuvre. I also would have to supply an account of some the actual features of Picasso’s later works.

Cavell argues that the sceptic’s problem arises because he crosses these two different uses of “I know.”<sup>4</sup> The sceptic is one who reinterprets our acknowledgment of the other’s pain, “I know you are in pain,” as a knowledge claim about the other’s inner state. In crossing the first and the second language-game, in which “I know” play different roles, he argues that the other is always in a privileged position with respect to himself, so that we can never be in a privileged position with respect to another.

Cavell’s sympathetic account of the sceptic’s position is one in which he does not aim to discard the sceptic’s crossing of language-games as a foolish error. Cavell’s approach to sceptical doubt is to be understood as an attempt to bring to light the form of disquietude that underlies the emergence of the problem of other minds. The sceptic, insofar that he is confronted with the other’s pain, finds that his confrontation with the other’s pain, and his recognition of the possibility that the other is able to suppress it, has made him singularly aware of the other’s status as a separate being. But he goes on to interpret this awareness as an intellectual problem.

There are, in Cavell’s account of this process, specific conditions in place that allow the sceptic to develop his doubt by crossing language games. There is, in other words, a ‘when’ that accompanies “what we say” if we are led to speak sceptically. Cavell investigates the sceptic’s interest in the occasion on which another person is led to remark: “I know I am in pain.” This remark Cavell reads as an expression of exasperation.<sup>5</sup> It is used when the other does not want to reveal his suffering to us, for instance out of shame, even though we in fact have sought to acknowledge it: “I can tell something is wrong with you; you must be in a lot of distress.” The sceptic, how-

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4. See Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 254-257.

5. See *ibid.*, 256.

ever, interprets the significance of the remark “I know I am in pain” differently in light of a superficial similarity between the language-games of claiming knowledge and acknowledgment. That is to say, the simple fact that we can withhold the proper recognition or expression of our suffering, for Cavell, can lead the sceptic into doubt:

[T]he fact that another person may now be in pain yet not acknowledge that he is in pain, is the same as, or seems to entail, the fact that he now knows that he is in pain; and this turns into the (imagined?) fact—or is read as the (imagined) fact—that he is now certain that he is in pain. And from this point, the rest of the argument is forced upon us, seems undeniable: How does he know (what is his certainty based on)? Because he feels (has) it (the fact that he feels (has) it). But obviously I can’t feel it, I can’t have the same feeling he has, his feeling; so I can never be certain another person is in pain. Moreover, even if he tells me, he might only be feigning, etc., etc.<sup>6</sup>

In Cavell’s view, the idea that the other may suffer, but is able to suppress expressing it, causes the sceptic’s anguish, since it leads to a picture of the other as one who, through access to his inner states, now knows what we cannot know because it has not been outwardly expressed. The sceptic intellectualizes this anguish into sceptical doubt by crossing the language-game of acknowledging (one’s own or another’s) suffering and the language-game by which we make knowledge claims. Thus, the sceptic’s feeling of powerlessness, which he experiences when confronted with the separate other as one who suffers but fails to give proper expression to it, “presents itself as ignorance—a metaphysical finitude [presents itself] as an intellectual lack.”<sup>7</sup> The crossing allows the sceptic to present the other as one who has what he cannot possess, or have access to, i.e., the other’s specific instance of the experience of pain.

In response, Cavell emphasizes that the other is one who “is *impaled* upon his knowledge”<sup>8</sup> of his suffering. The sceptic’s doubt, by contrast, allows him to attribute to the other a sense of mastery in which he possesses access to his pain. The other, in the sceptic’s account, has access to his own experiences in a way that the

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6. *Ibid.*, 257.

7. *Ibid.*, 263.

8. *Ibid.*, 261.

sceptic does not. And by conceiving of the other's relation to his suffering in this way, the sceptic suppresses the powerlessness that he experiences in the face of the other's suffering. It is, for Cavell, rather unhelpful to think of the other as one who has access to a secret garden from which we are debarred by our ordinary finitude;<sup>9</sup> or it is, at the very least, unhelpful to do so insofar that one does not wish to turn to the other into an intellectual problem, but rather relate to him as a person subject to suffering.

Similarly, the problem of solipsism can take hold if I, with respect to myself, reinterpret the "I know" in "I know I am in pain." When I reinterpret the expression, I find I can conceive of my relation to my suffering in such a way as to allow myself a sense of mastery, or of privileged access. This sense is disallowed by our ordinary subjection to suffering, which itself now goes unacknowledged as it becomes intellectualized. I appease the underlying feeling of shame or exposure that drives me to reply to an acknowledgment of my suffering with the answer, "I know I am in pain."

Still, Cavell not only indicates that the sceptical position allows us a sense of mastery that is disallowed by the ordinary experience of being subject to suffering. He also shows that we can understand and notice when another person suppresses his suffering and fails to give proper expression to it, just as we are able to recognize that someone's statement "I know I am in pain" constitutes an attempt to repress his suffering. And he applies this very fact to the sceptic's case itself. That is to say, Cavell appears to approach the sceptic's intellectualization of his anguish as a failure to give to it its proper expression. The sceptic is presented as one who suffers at the hands of other's possible suffering, but who fails to acknowledge as much, opting instead to intellectualize his anxiety into sceptical doubt. By taking this approach, Cavell has conceived of the sceptic's doubt itself as a target for sympathetic understanding, so as to undermine the anxiety that allows the doubt to emerge. He tries to prove, in other words, that it is misguided to think that we are never in a better position in respect to the other than the other is in respect to himself. And that we can in fact help the other, who suppresses his pain, by providing the right words to express it. For this is the actual goal of Cavell's approach, as opposed to an attempt to show

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9. See *ibid.*, 261.

that he has outsmarted the sceptic. Cavell does not want to better understand the sceptic than the sceptic understands himself to outwit him, but to help him with his struggle.

Cavell intends to show the sceptic that the impossible desire to be the other, to undo one's separateness so as to gain complete intimacy with the other, is an unnecessary desire, since the power of the sympathetic imagination is such that we can rely on it to penetrate the other's thoughts in ways that the other may himself not even have expected or foreseen. This, Cavell indicates, is one of the sources of our gratitude to literature. Literature is capable of revealing aspects of our own experience of which we lost sight because we did not express properly, by which we failed to take possession of them. Cavell tries to write a philosophical essay that can play the same role for philosophical scepticism about the existence of other minds. Crucially, the depths Cavell's sympathetic imagination plumbs are not simply depths of intellectual discernment. Cavell wants the sceptic to recognize that he himself has struggled with a doubt which the sceptic still entertains in its original form. And he wants him to see that, in reading Cavell's essay, he too can work through that doubt.

This search for trust explains Cavell's indirect approach. His essay is written in such a way as both to require and allow its target to think along with the author as he leads him through a series of steps that culminate in a compelling affirmation of the power of expression and sympathetic understanding: "To know you are in pain is to acknowledge it, or to withhold the acknowledgment.—I know your pain the way you do."<sup>10</sup> Cavell's strategy, then, involves gradually building a bond of trust with the sceptic, since, for the sceptic, there is the "problem of *making* [...] experiences known [...] because one hasn't the forms of words at one's command to release those feelings, and one hasn't anyone else whose interest in helping to find the words one trusts."<sup>11</sup> Cavell takes the role of looking for the words with which the sceptic can safely release the anxiety and shame underlying his doubt. And he is able to assume that particular role because his strategy of composition portrays him as working, or having worked at the very least, along the same path which the sceptic now follows. In sum, Cavell's strategy of gradual identification with the sceptic is

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10. *Ibid.*, 266.

11. *Ibid.*, 265.

meant to defuse the feelings of shame and exposure which, in his account, will lead to the emergence of the problem of other minds, the problem of privacy and the problem of solipsism.

### **The Problem of Suffering Intellectualized**

There seems to be a fundamental problem with Cavell's approach: it itself reads as the result of a process of intellectualization; to put it differently, Cavell's approach is at the very least marked by the process of intellectualization he tries to uncover.

Cavell's soothing of the sceptic's anxiety, in which he stresses that the other is one who is impaled upon his *knowledge* of his suffering rather than one who has supreme cognitive access to it, and to which idea he then responds by validating the penetrative power of sympathy, cuts off the path to an alternative understanding I would pursue instead. The same counts for Cavell's appreciation of the sceptic's initial noble intentions: "He begins with a full appreciation of the decisively significant fact" that "others may be suffering and I not know," which leads him to become "enmeshed [...] in questions of whether we can have the same suffering, one another's suffering."<sup>12</sup> The problem of the suffering is, in most cases, hardly captured by the insistence that it may be that others suffer while we are somehow unaware of it. The problem with the suffering of others is usually not that we are unaware of its occurrence, but rather that we are deeply aware of it, and that we are at the same time powerfully aware of our powerlessness to alleviate it. Similarly, in suffering we are not primarily impaled upon our knowledge of our suffering, but rather upon our suffering itself, even if we can grant that the emotion of shame can exacerbate our experiences of suffering. I would suggest, then, that his attempt to inhabit and work through the sceptic's intellectualized position has lead Cavell to retain certain aspects of the sceptic's general sense of the type of problem our separateness must lead to.

### **"I Feel Your Pain": Survivor's Guilt**

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12. Ibid., 247.

By beginning from the point of view that the problem of suffering is that we often are aware of it yet feel powerless to do much about it, we can begin to think differently about the emergence of sceptical doubt as a response to the suffering of others. The problem now becomes not whether the sympathetic imagination is able to penetrate deeply enough so as to provide an understanding of the other's motives. Instead, the issue shifts to the question as to whether our reliance on expressions of sympathy is legitimate. Cavell's "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*" can help us clarify why this is so, just as it can help us reconceptualise the emergence of the problem of other minds insofar as it is linked to the problem of cynical self-doubt.

Cavell's essay on Beckett portrays Hamm, *Endgame*'s protagonist, as one who suffers from survivor's guilt that drives him into self-denial, madness, and so tyranny. The goal of Hamm's tyranny is to see all life, including his own, extinguished. But, because he is both blind and wheelchair-bound, Hamm needs the help of Clov. As Hamm's servant, Clov has to check for signs of life on the horizon, peering out of the windows of the bunker in which they both live. That is to say, Clov has to verify for Hamm that all life has been extinguished. As such, it is obvious to the reader that Hamm can never be certain that what remains of life inside the bunker is all that remains of life in its entirety. And it is equally obvious that, as long as Hamm and Clov survive, their survival constitutes a negation of Hamm's primary goal. This basic set-up identifies *Endgame* as a literary attempt to reflect on the sources of an attitude of paralyzed melancholy, which the play then identifies as a symptom of survivor's guilt.

*Endgame* is a reply to the biblical story of Noah, in which God exterminates all human life on earth with the exception of Noah's family. In the biblical story, Ham is one of the sons of Noah and so survives the flood. He falls out of favour with his father, because he finds Noah naked in a drunken stupor. Noah is naked not only in a literal but also in a figurative sense. He is naked in a figurative sense because the reason God singled him out for survival was that he was supposedly a righteous and worthy man. Now, however, he has shown himself to be flawed not only because of his inebriation, but also because his shame at Ham's knowledge of his flaw drives him to the act of cursing his son and his progeny. Ham's encounter with Noah, then, is a subplot that speaks to the impossibility of human fruitfulness without the risk of

transgression and failure. Noah's cultivation of wine, in this story, symbolizes his fulfilment of the task of fruitfulness which God imposes under his renewed covenant with mankind. At the same time, Noah's abuse of drink is meant to draw our attention to the fact that he is still liable to weakness of will and a capacity for error. The basic tension which Beckett detects and expertly explores lies in the fact that Noah repeats the exact same tendencies that led to God's choice to destroy mankind.

In *Endgame*, two further survivors who also live inside the bunker are Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, whom Hamm keeps confined to trashcans with Clov's help. Nagg is Beckett's version of the biblical Noah. In Beckett's play, it is he who is subjected to punishment by Hamm, in what constitutes a reversal of the punishment Ham is subjected to in the original story. In response, Cavell reads Hamm as one who, having seen his father for what he truly is, believes God was wrong to spare him and his family.<sup>13</sup> God ought not to have made an exception for Noah, since Hamm knows Noah simply to be an ordinary flawed man, just as those who were killed in the flood by God. Given his father's ordinary flaws, Nagg cannot justify the fact that he and his family were saved whereas others were left to die, since Noah was supposedly saved by God because he was a righteous man. By seeking to extinguish his own life and that of his family, Hamm reminds God he is no different from those who were killed. As such, his desire for self-denial is to be taken as a distorted expression of solidarity.

Hamm also wants to extinguish all other remaining life, because he has come to think of life *as such* as illegitimate. This spite against life can be explained in light of a traumatized awareness of the suffering of others. Hamm thinks we are largely unconcerned with the fact that there is no reason that we are spared, whereas others have to suffer. If life is blind self-perpetuation, nothing about life, including our own, can be redeemed. In Cavell's reading, Nagg's apparent lack of concern for the fact that he was saved for no particular reason is what leads Hamm to see us as inevitably and irredeemably self-interested. This lack explains why Hamm curses his father and considers his renewed task of fruitfulness or replenishment an entirely illegitimate

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13. See Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 139-140.

one. For Hamm, the fulfilment of God's new covenant with man can only reproduce the same kind of flawed man God had wanted to eliminate to begin with.

Hamm believes the only justified way of responding to the suffering of others is to share in it. This desire to share in the suffering of others itself, however, reflects an impossible desire to take away the others' suffering by assuming it as one's own. He wants to assume their suffering to extinguish it for them. This, of course, cannot be done. And because it is impossible, he is only able to respond by deeming all of life, all our practices, all our pursuits of interests, and all forms of human expression illegitimate. In the face of the fact of suffering, then, we can be led to ask ourselves whether we are permitted to live our lives, whether life and its pursuits are not at heart illegitimate. If we are inclined to answer this question positively, we are led to hold a view of life in which the only proper way to live is to fix ourselves to despair and to melancholy. We find ourselves perpetually at odds with life. The melancholy person despairs of his own irrepressible participation in life, but, despite his intense wish for self-denial, finds himself unable to end life. Hamm, after all, continues to live. In melancholy, we are at best able to colour our inevitable attachment to life and the pursuit of our interests with a sense of reticence. In fact, Hamm cannot properly express his desire for self-denial. In doing so, Hamm would express a desire, which itself is an act that his worldview cannot condone. This is an alternate articulation of the frustrated logic of *Endgame*, since it explains why Hamm is alive but immobilized.

Cavell himself describes Hamm's self-mortification by stating that "[s]olitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence" are, contrary to what is by now a hackneyed interpretation of Beckett, "not the givens of Beckett's characters but their goal, their new heroic undertaking."<sup>14</sup> In *Endgame*, Hamm specifically asks Clov: "We're not beginning to mean something?" Clov laughs: "Mean something! You and I, mean something!" Despite Clov's swift dismissal of Hamm's worry, the interchange is such that the spectator is led to infer that these characters mean to mean nothing.

Hamm's worldview is, of course, irreparably flawed. The unforgiving view that all of our pursuits or interests are inherently illegitimate allows us to avoid the difficulties we face in finding suitable and sufficiently subtle answers to the question as to how we ought to live our lives as moral beings. The rejection of any pursuit *qua pur-*

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14. *Ibid.*, 156.

*suit* also reflects the disappointment which we are bound to experience with the limitations of any attempt to provide a satisfactory or comprehensive answer to that question. The melancholy of Hamm allows us to suppress the role of judgment in the process of separating expressions of interest that constitute a form of transgression from those we can legitimately retain. All in all, his worldview allows us to avoid the inevitable complexities of engaging in a serious and sustained attempt at living and contemplating an ethical life, even as it appears to allow us to lay claim to that ideal.

In response to the line of analysis Beckett's *Endgame* produces, I will now try to develop a philosophical articulation of, and response to, Hamm's survivor's guilt. Although Beckett achieves a powerful understanding of this convoluted and highly specific experience in *Endgame*, he does so by harnessing the tendency to hyperbole that defines it, since hyperbole is part of the skewed self-understanding survivor's guilt enforces. A philosophical account is one which, in order to defuse the specific anxiety Beckett's play embodies, must try to find a more even-tempered way of portraying survivor's guilt. To render such a plain account, I discuss the case in which I am faced with the other's suffering and express my sympathy by saying "I feel your pain." This account should clarify the way in which Cavell's essay on Beckett allows us to think of the emergence of other minds scepticism differently, and to clarify the link between the problem of other minds and the problem of cynical self-doubt.

Ordinarily, our expressions of sympathy function as a recognition of the fact that we suffer at the hands of our ability to recognize that the other currently suffers the same specific *type* of suffering we are capable of experiencing. Still, we not only recognize the other's suffering, but are also affected by it. By expressing sympathy, we release ourselves from the grip the other's suffering has on us, and help him to be released from the way suffering singles him out. By expressing sympathy, however, we do not mean to say we feel the same *instance* of suffering as the one suffering.

Yet, as I understand him, the sceptic is one who believes that, in saying "I feel your pain," he catches himself in a lie. The helplessness he experiences in light of the other's suffering makes him reinterpret his words in such a way that they no longer mean what we ordinarily mean by them. His words now appear to indicate to the other that he *is* able to experience the instance of suffering which the other suffers, even if it is the case that he cannot, since he cannot be the other. At the same time,

however, he comes to believe that his words commit him to a different response to the other's suffering: they seem to have promised to the other that he *can* respond to the other's suffering by experiencing his suffering for him. This is how we arrive in the position of Hamm, who experiences a form of survivor's guilt, in which we feel we ought to be able to suffer in the other's stead. The sceptic's words make it seem to him as if absorbing the other's suffering is the only meaningful way of responding to it. Once the sceptic begins to think as much, he will develop a superhuman ideal of responsiveness which he, in turn, takes to be his responsibility towards the other. If he cannot absorb the other's suffering, he believes, he fails the other; we pass over the other's suffering if we respond to it in any other way than taking possession of it.

Having caught himself, or so he thinks, in an unforeseen lie, the sceptic will take issue with expressions of sympathy. First of all, he focuses on the fact that our expressions of sympathy, as expressions of anguish, have the effect of releasing us from the way in which we are gripped by the other's suffering. More precisely, he starts to think we only express our sympathy to rid ourselves of our concern for the other. Secondly, he starts to think that expressions of sympathy unnecessarily shift attention away from the other's suffering to our own suffering at the hands of the other's pain. The sceptic is inclined to say here: what does it matter that we suffer at the hands of the other's suffering; the other's suffering itself is what matters! The sceptic, in other words, is pained by a sense that we cannot get away from ourselves so as to stay more radically faithful to the other. Both of these elements contribute to, and give expression to, the sceptic's suspicion that he has been fundamentally self-interested in expressing his sympathy with others as they suffer. This self-interest he identifies as having a specific quality: he did not consciously pursue it. He believes he catches himself in a lie, even though he did not intend to lie. He believes he catches himself looking out only for himself, even though he never intended to do so.

Once we are struck by cynical self-doubt, then, we begin to think of ourselves as inescapably self-interested. We think that even when we try to go beyond being self-interested, we cannot escape self-interest. The specific nature of our self-interest is our blind spot. While we can try to excavate and analyse our obscured self-interest, every renewed attempt to analyse it is inevitably marked by a new obscured form of self-interest. This process of revision can potentially go on endlessly; the process, at

least, can never reach a truly satisfactory end. This, then, is another way of referring to the affliction that strikes Hamm, but only insofar that it constitutes an intellectual version of his tendency towards self-mortification. In this interpretation, cynical self-doubt is a problem, or attitude, that arises as an intellectualization of survivor's guilt.

Taking a wider perspective, we can argue that the origin of cynical self-doubt, which can specifically emerge as an intellectualization of survivor's guilt, lies in the (perceived) occurrence of moral weakness of will (akratic failure). Cynical self-doubt intellectualizes weakness of will: it appears that we would rather believe that we are inescapably self-interested than accept responsibility for the fact that we have failed to act in the way we believe we ought to have acted.<sup>15</sup> In the specific case of the sceptic's survivor's guilt, the way he feels he ought to act requires him to outstrip the limits of what is humanly possible. His reinterpretation of the phrase "I feel your pain" leads him to want to act in accordance with a moral motive that imposes a demand that cannot be met. Crucially, it is the sceptic himself who *perceives* his failure to meet it as an akratic failure; the final part of this paper will question this perception.

At this point, the reader may wonder: how does this reading of the way in which our expression of sympathy "I feel your pain" can lead us to cynical self-doubt relate to the problem of other minds? The reasoning I observe here is as follows. The sceptic is one who will interpret our expression of sympathy "I feel your pain" by stating that it is impossible: "I cannot feel your pain; I cannot have or take it for you." This leads him into cynical self-doubt, because his words lead him to think we have caught ourselves in a lie. Still, there is a second path he can follow. The idea that he cannot have the other's pain, or absorb it for him by taking his place, can be intellectualized into a doubt about the existence of other minds: "If I cannot take the other's place, I cannot have his experiences, so that I cannot know if he even exists in the first place." This alternate reading of scepticism about other minds argues that the sceptic arrives at his doubt because of a proximity between the two expressions of sympathy "I feel your pain" and "I know your pain." This proximity allows us to reinterpret our original inability to feel in terms of an inability to know with certainty.

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15. This is a view I also defend in my 2014 paper on J.M. Coetzee's autobiographical fiction, "The Grounds of Cynical Self-Doubt: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime*." I do so, in part, on the basis of Coetzee's fiction itself.

This approach inverts the way other minds scepticism was originally conceived of, since the sceptic originally conceived of his inability to know as an inability to feel.

In sum, the sceptic's doubt about other minds takes hold because a specific set of circumstances lead him to believe that the proper way in which we ought to relate to the other's suffering is one in which we ought to be able to take the other's pain from him, to have or absorb it for him so as to extinguish it for him. The sceptic intellectualizes his inability to absorb the other's pain, to experience it for him by taking his place, into a philosophical problem in which his inability to access the other's experience makes him doubt the ground of his belief in the other's existence. The same set of conditions can also lead us to assume a position of cynical self-doubt.

It will seem, then, that the sceptic is faced with an unsettling scenario in which he falls prey at the same time to cynical self-doubt and to other minds scepticism, both of which nevertheless still serve to deflect the underlying problem that one has been weak-willed. The confluence of these two forms of scepticism, which, in brief, are related insofar that they are problems of knowledge or truth, can also lead us to propagate a specific ethic. This ethic of alterity advocates passiveness and abjection before an Other on whose otherness we can have no grip, and whose very otherness would at the same time be threatened by any attempt we might make to grasp it. This version of the ethics of alterity is a dead end.<sup>16</sup> It can provide us with no guiding sense of how to take targeted action for others, nor can it provide us with a sense of the necessary limits of such action. Finding limits is of the utmost importance to the sceptic as I conceive of him, as an absence of proper limits leads him to paralysis. In suggesting that the confluence of cynical doubt and scepticism about the existence of other minds leads to this ethic, I assume that the sceptic's doubt about the existence of other minds entails the problem of privacy. For the sceptic, the fact that we may recognize the other's outward expressions as expressions of an inner state cannot guarantee that the content of those inner states matches ours, which itself has as its

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16. I intend to argue in future writing (and this then is the dialogue which is beginning to develop in this paper) that J.M. Coetzee's early novels, in response to the fact of suffering, are shaped (but perhaps not entirely determined) by this type of unfruitful ethics of alterity to develop their ethical charge. Friday in *Foe*, the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Verceuil in *Age of Iron*: all of these could be read as characters that demonstrate Coetzee's sustained interest in an extreme ethic of alterity which is itself rooted in cynical self-doubt as it converges with the problem of other minds. One prospect, then, is that we might find more fruitful conceptions of alterity in Coetzee's later fiction, as the author begins to question the grounds of cynical self-doubt.

corollary that we cannot know that those outward expressions express any type of inner state. When the cynic combines his sense that we cannot trust the other's expressions as reliable indexes of inner states with his sense that we are inevitably self-interested, he will think his interpretation of the other's behaviour is inevitably biased and adopt a deferential stance in which any judgment of the other is withheld. This deferential stance helps to suppress the underlying problem of weakness of will, as no legitimate judgments remain on which the cynic could hope to base his actions.

Still, it can also be the case that only one form of doubt will take hold: in this case, other minds scepticism functions as an alternate intellectualization of our inability to absorb the other's pain, and so provide refuge from cynical self-doubt. Other minds scepticism is able to function as a refuge because it is, all in all, a more static, dispassionate, controlled, and controlling form of doubt. It provides a stronger form of negative mastery than cynical self-doubt does. Cavell presents other minds scepticism as a position that allows us to relieve the strain which our ordinary reliance upon the notion of another imposes, insofar that it abstracts from the responsibility, or responsiveness, which the other's expressions entail; it implies a loss of acknowledgment. In our everyday interactions with the other, we are not meant to take the other's expressions as elements that fail to establish the truth of his existence; they are not meant, in their ordinary role, to tell us "how it *is*" with the other, but rather "*how* it is" with him.<sup>17</sup> Other minds scepticism is a form of doubt that enables us to lose sight of the actual role our notion of another is meant to play.

To Cavell's conception of the enabling aspects of scepticism I add another. Unlike other minds scepticism, cynical self-doubt is able to affect our inner life in profoundly disturbing ways. It can undermine our everyday ability to act as moral agents, and it also serves to deflect the need to take responsibility for weakness of will. It robs the reasons upon which we act of the legitimacy, and so of much of the force, which they are supposed to have for us. The problem of other minds, by contrast, allows us to avoid the endless self-questioning to which cynical self-doubt leads. The seductive picture of the self as an inner realm to which we have privileged and unimpeded access, but which at the same time leaves us locked out from others,

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17. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45.

leaves no space for the kind of frenzied self-questioning cynical self-doubt entails, especially so because the reality of the other as a source of shame loses its grip on us.

Nevertheless, the above remarks are not meant to imply that cynical self-doubt necessarily loses out to other minds scepticism. If we are inclined to cynical self-doubt, we are likely to suspect that sceptical doubt about the existence of other minds, as well as the problem of solipsism, serve an ulterior purpose that we should uncover. This I have done, or perhaps only in part. Yet the cynical view itself may be doubted. We can also try to establish what is at stake in cynical self-doubt so as to release ourselves from its grip. I have done so, at least in part, by arguing that cynical self-doubt intellectualizes weakness of will: rather than taking responsibility for our weakness of will, we prefer to believe that we are inevitably self-interested, and thereby can set into motion a potentially endless process of revision of our particular motives. Still, there is little chance we will in fact have successfully undone cynical self-doubt in the specific case I have discussed, unless we can show that the moral motive in which the sceptic believes is faulty. A more solid solution requires, then, that we demonstrate that the desire to absorb the other's suffering in order to extinguish its impact on him does not have the status of a judicious moral motive, so that a failure to live by it cannot be understood as an occurrence of weakness of will.

### **Steps to a Solution**

As I have said, the sceptic is led astray in his assessment of the role of expressions of sympathy in our lives. If we demonstrate this to him, we take a step towards allowing him to recover the expression of sympathy as a way of responding to suffering.

We can reiterate that by using the expression "I feel your pain" we do not mean to express that we are capable of experiencing the other's pain for him. The words never meant this, so that the sceptic is wrong to think he catches himself in a lie. If we use expressions of sympathy, we mean to say that we are affected by the other's suffering exactly because we are able to recognize it as a certain *type* of suffering.

To this first point the sceptic will want to reply: even if that is not what the expression ordinarily means, this fact in itself does not imply that we ought not to be

able to respond to the pain of others by assuming it for them. In other words, if we stress the sheer impossibility of taking the other's pain, this point may not suffice to change the sceptic's perspective on the matter. In response, it helps to recall that the sceptic's inability to allow expressions of sympathy their rightful role in his response to the suffering of others paralyzes him. He holds himself to an absolute standard he can never achieve. He so condemns himself to radical impotence in the face of the other's suffering. As such, he ends up in the position of the one who lets the suffering of others pass him by. And this is what he accused us of in relying on expressions of sympathy; given his view that we ought to be able to respond to the other's pain by possessing it emerges in part due to the fact that he believes others' to be indifferent to the pain of the other, the sceptic is certain to be struck by this line of response.

The sceptic, however, is bound to take this second point as a painful blow; it will return him to the type of restless mood in which he began to suspect that expressions of sympathy are a form of self-deceit and expressions of a covert self-interest. Instead, he now suspects his suspicion of sympathy was itself an expression of a covert self-interest. Was his obsession with an absolute form of responsiveness to the other's suffering simply a ruse which he played on himself so as to allow him to ignore the other's pain, even if he did not realise this was the case? To disabuse the sceptic of this unhelpful cynical line of thought, we can remind him that he began to believe that he was duty-bound to absorb the other's suffering in response to an experience of powerlessness. In light of this reminder, it should become clear that his self-suspicion itself is unfounded: his cynical self-doubt intellectualizes an unsettling experience of powerlessness, which it deflects. The idea that we are inevitably but obscurely self-interested, even when we seek not to be, is an intellectualization of the everyday experience in which we fail to go beyond our self-concern, because we believe we are simply powerless to do so, or because we are too cowardly to do so.

Only now are we in a position, in relation to the sceptic's cynical self-doubt, to stress that expressions of sympathy are beneficial not only to those who provide them, but even more so to those who receive them. Those who receive them are comforted by the acknowledgment of their suffering. This point will tackle the sceptic's sense that expressing his feelings of sympathy is much like doing nothing at all. Still, expressions of sympathy are not just symbolical attempts to restore a sense of equal-

ity between the one who suffers and the one who sympathizes, which so pre-empt the sense of shame to which our suffering exposes us. If we give expression to our suffering at the hands of the other's suffering, we do not mean to draw attention away from the other, nor do we simply seek to release ourselves from our concern for him; we are truly affected by the other's suffering and wish to show our concern. Moreover, it is only once we are able to release ourselves from the paralysing grip the other's suffering has on us that we can go *beyond* the fact of simply recognizing it. That is to say, while the sceptic thinks of expressing sympathy as at best an empty act, and at worst as a cynical and self-interested one, we must see that expressing our sympathy can function as a part of a *larger process of responsiveness* by which we help the other. It releases us from the grip of the other's suffering so that we may *actively intervene to alter the circumstances that contribute to it*. It is only after we compose ourselves that we can start this more comprehensive process of alleviation.

Now, it is true that often we do not perceive how we can help someone who is suffering beyond the act of expressing our sympathy with him. There appears to be nothing or too little we can actively *do* to meaningfully alter his circumstances. This overwhelming feeling of powerlessness is frustrating. Yet it is also true that we tend either to overestimate how much is asked of us or to underestimate how much we are able to contribute. These are matters in which ethics' role is to help us gain a sense of measure and clarity. Moreover, it is in contexts in which we feel as if we are wholly powerless that we must remind ourselves that expressions of sympathy, which to the sceptic seem simply banal or empty, often have a greater capacity to comfort than any type of direct action that we might take to try to help others. To express sympathy is to undertake a form of action, however negligible we consider it.

This reminder does not mean the sceptic's suspicion of sympathy is entirely absurd. In fact, I cannot conclude without making a few reasonable concessions to the sceptic's point of view. To fail to do so may exacerbate an unwillingness to grant the role of sympathy in our life. Expressions of sympathy are often abused in the particular ways in which the sceptic exclusively, and thereby wrongly, presents them. We *do* sometimes express our sympathy only to draw attention to ourselves as magnanimous facilitators of care, or because we consider ourselves to be upstanding persons. We *do* sometimes abuse expressions of sympathy so as to relieve ourselves from a

painful awareness of the other's suffering. Or we employ it to force the other to stifle his expressions of suffering, so that we no longer have to be confronted with his distress. By contrast, we will sometimes rely on our ability to be affected by the other's suffering as an ability that allows us to wallow in it, to use it as our own personal sentimental masochistic indulgence. This attitude is what we might have accused Hamm of, if we had regarded him only from a sceptical perspective which considers him to be a narcissist who in fact does not experience a true bereavement.

The above tendencies can, to a lesser or to a greater extent, become parts of our character, should we fail to resist them and the escape they provide. Crucially, however, they abuse and distort our capacity for sympathy. The fact that our reliance on expressions of sympathy is open to abuse does not mean we must deny the role they have in our relations with others. If we accept that we experience suffering and sympathy, both of which we should properly express, we can avoid a cynical attitude in which we forego the effort which is required to contemplate, and live, a good life.