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The Aliveness of the Posthumous (2)

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Let us pick up where we left off. Part I started a conversation — pun intended — on Stanley Cavell's intellectual legacy after the publication of *Here and There* with the help of scholars who have repeatedly and proficiently engaged with his work. The purpose, retained here, is to lead Cavell's philosophy back where it is at home by spelling out the terms of criticism he contributed to set out and invite new attention to themes and argumentative tropes he cultivated. Given the range of directions in which Cavell's philosophy extends, it is little wonder that one volume could not contain everything worth touching on. Hence, the need for the Part II you are now reading. Part II has clearly no ambition to be exhaustive, though. But there is no perversity, we believe, in thinking that leaving something out can dovetail with our aim of letting someone in: once again, if the essays here collected will go someway toward rekindling the interest in Cavell's philosophy or, more generally and importantly, toward showing the aliveness of its philosophical approach to understand the world and ourselves, we will have enough ground to plant the flag we are trying to wave.

As with Part I, essays are here grouped in sections to favour the reader's perusal, standing the usual *caveat* — due to the nature of Cavell's thought — that there might be more points of connection than of separation between essays of different sections. The first section, which parallels the first in Part I and is equally entitled "Philosophy and Self-Knowledge," discusses Cavell's emphasis on the knowledge of oneself not only as a topic of philosophical inquiry, but also and perhaps especially as the means through which the latter can be carried out meaningfully and produce (re-)discovery and authentic expression. In what might be read as an articulation, or confession, of the self-knowledge he earned for himself and tried to elicit in others through his work, Cavell precisely stresses "the use of [one]self

as the source of [philosophy's] evidence and as an instance of its conclusions."[1] If the essay opening Part I enlisted Socrates, the prototypical gadfly of philosophers, in the tradition that finds in self-knowledge, or recovery from self-ignorance, the target of philosophy, Steven Affeldt's opening essay carefully traces the role of Austin as Cavell's personal gadfly in the latter's philosophical flourishing, or self-affirmation. Plumbing Cavell's autobiographical recounting of crises of expression, from his childhood to the early steps in the academic world, Affeldt resurfaces with an understanding of how Austin's philosophising shaped Cavell's philosophical voice by advocating and professing a general return of the human voice to philosophy. It is part of the understanding that Affeldt illustrates that Cavell not only inherits the sense of the powers intrinsic to (the appeal to) ordinary language that Austin groundbreakingly brings out. He also moves beyond his teacher in taking seriously the human — too human — drive to deprive ourselves of such powers and to remain powerless, exposed to emptiness and confusion.

In her essay, Naoko Saito offers an examination of Cavell's notion of self-knowledge as warding us off from distorted accounts of the relation between the inner and the outer and pointing to "what is accurate in the philosophical or metaphysical idea of privacy,"[2] on which, for Saito's Cavell, philosophy and metaphysics mulishly go astray. If the task of philosophical thinking is instead to gain and re-gain self-knowledge, then, concludes Saito, philosophical thinking must be identified as a practice and a way of life where we learn how to singularise our voice, encounter ourselves and others and find what matters.

The second section, 'Empathy and the Knowledge of Others', includes significative contributions on one of the most provocative pieces collected in *Here and There*, namely "Notes Mostly about Empathy."[3] This piece resumes Cavell's career-long investigation of what it is (or means) to know other minds or, perhaps better, *others* — a philosophical problem that, Cavell famously claims, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigation* discovers, or re-discovers, for analytic philosophy in general. Edward Minar instructively guides us through the piece. He starts by noting

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1. Cavell, *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Saundra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 102.
2. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 330.
3. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," in *Here and There*, 101-108.

that Cavell finds a particular incoherence in the notion of empathy when it comes to the problem of scepticism about other minds. To explain why, Minar links the discussion of empathy in "Notes" to Cavell's earlier extensive engagement with that problem in "Knowing and Acknowledging" and in Part IV of *The Claim of Reason*.[4] In particular, argues Minar, empathy seems to fly in the face of what Cavell calls "acknowledgement": while the latter is meant to capture our real need in living and engaging with others, the former contributes to reinforcing the confused picture of a cognitive barrier separating us from them by purporting to be a passage past such a barrier. But to surrender this picture and thus look for an epistemic bridge that might lead us directly into other people's minds or inner gardens is not to deviate from our acknowledgement of others but rather to elicit it or, better, its avoidance. Minar then asks what Cavell significantly adds to this nest of ideas in "Notes." His answer is that Cavell starts locating there the ordinary role of empathy in relation to acknowledgement as a mode of responsiveness to others that can bring us in conversation with and tune in to them — that is, as a mode of making ourselves known to them, and thus letting them be known.

Similarly, Edward Witherspoon's essay draws on "Notes" and precedent writings of Cavell to show that philosophy is tempted and tends to deny or distort what knowing others is and, in so doing, to ignore the genuine difficulties it involves. Witherspoon takes Ayer's treatment of the traditional problem of other minds as a paradigmatic example of philosophy's vices in this regard. According to Ayer, even if we cannot have direct knowledge of people's experiences, feelings and emotions, we are justified in our attributions on the grounds of their behaviour and by analogy with what we experience or feel when we exhibit such a behaviour. Witherspoon argues, in step with Cavell, not only that Ayer's proposal is unhelpful but also that it misrepresents the phenomenology of knowing others as others. Empathy as the ability to know what it is to be in a particular state of mind and the judgments one might express in it is required if, explains Witherspoon, we are to avoid philosophy's tendency to deflection, that is, to flee the genuine difficulties of knowing others – like their dissimulating or lying about their feelings — and get instead enmeshed in

4. See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 220-45; Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 329-496.

theoretical puzzles of no real significance. In Witherspoon's understanding, rather than solutions, those difficulties call for acknowledgement and this, in turn, for our expression of knowledge, so for conversation. Conversation provides the chief way to learn about other minds while revealing our own, or even ourselves. The risk we run in conversations and, more generally, in trying to know others, concludes Witherspoon, is not a possible loss of certainty but the certain fact of being exposed to and for them.

The essays of the third section, entitled 'Music and Meaning', focus on (motifs in) Part III of *Here and There*, where Cavell remembers his early tormented transition from performing music to the discovery of philosophy to tease out the relation of reciprocal illumination in which understanding a piece of music and understanding a stretch of discourse stand. In his essay, Victor Krebs proposes that Cavell's vocational crisis as a musician left a trace on his philosophy in what Krebs identifies as a proper "aesthetic turn." The key to appreciating that turn, argues Krebs, is Cavell's re-interpretation of Austin's performative utterances as passionate utterances, essentially infused with the sound they might have — that is, the meaning we might hear when they are used — in our (forms of) life. But we are inclined to suppress this sound and disconnect our utterances from what instils meaning to them, namely the human voice, to which we close our ears. According to Krebs, in looking for what Cavell calls "acknowledgment," we search for and test our mutual attunement in language through which we can (return to) hear each other. The core of Cavell's aesthetic turn in philosophy, concludes Krebs, lies in the non-representational understanding akin to musical understanding involved and required to understand our representations and find ourselves intelligible. This vision, for Krebs, teaches us to live with the true mark of our finitude.

Paul Standish's essay reflects on the relation between Arnold Schoenberg's notion of "row" and Wittgenstein's of "rules" on which Cavell commented in "Philosophy of the Unheard."[5] Standish begins by disputing a conservative reading of Wittgenstein on rules as standards of meaning fixed by society's approval and a caricatural reading of Schoenberg's innovation in his break with tonal music as consisting of a new, theoretically imposed set of rules. According to Standish, Cavell

5. Cavell, "Philosophy and the Unheard," in *Here and There*, 260-68.

has gone to great lengths to show the shortcomings of these readings, but we need to be careful not to misunderstand his efforts. Standish explains why Schoenberg's impact on music might be analogous to what Cavell's Wittgenstein brought to philosophy. Contrary to what Adorno seems to suggest, Schoenberg's crisis of musical expression is not, or not simply, for Cavell, a liberation from the false consciousness of the precedent tradition. Standish suggests that Cavell's reading emerges in light of the music theorist David Lewin's opinion of Schoenberg, which Standish proceeds to illustrate. Cavell's reading is that a crisis of (musical) expression is an attempt, marked by continuous tensions, at finding one's voice or, one might even say, being true to oneself, a search for what Emerson calls — and Cavell recalls as — self-reliance. But, adds Standish, Adorno and Cavell might then be closer than it seemed because they both see the conditions under which we can share words and the world as exposed to our leaping from them, perhaps away from false appearances (or pictures) but clearly towards our true needs, that is, towards new possibilities for (and responsibilities to) ourselves, our community, and the world, yet at the cost of remain misunderstood or even unheard.

Eran Guter devotes his essay to spelling out the extent of the elective affinity between Wittgenstein and the composer Gustav Mahler, who both manifested *in propria persona* — according to what Cavell claims in "A Scale of Eternity"[6] — the modern fear of inexpressiveness that derives from "confront[ing] the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in" those who question it in order to repossess it.[7] By drawing on Wittgenstein's famous and less-famous remarks on modernity and modern music, Guter takes him as identifying two kinds of myopia that are signs of cultural decline, namely the stiff imposition of a form of progress and its utter negation. But Mahler, for Wittgenstein, does not fit any of them. What is troubling about Mahler's music is the defamiliarization of familiar musical criteria. To explain this, Guter appeals to Cavell's understanding of Spengler's influence on Wittgenstein. In brief, Mahler gives voice to another kind of myopia that is a proper condition of modernity, namely, that of being or becoming disoriented, at a loss in one own's shoes, or with one's own culture. Despite seeing the genuine sense of the cultural

6. Cavell, "A Scale of Eternity," in *Here and There*, 279-85.
7. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

decline in modern music, Mahler did not cope with it as genuinely, showing a failure of character or authenticity that Wittgenstein constantly feared about himself and his style of philosophising, according to Guter.

Finally, the fourth section, 'Cinema and Collection," traces or extends Cavell's reflections in *Here and There* (and elsewhere) on cultural phenomena or aspects of life that are not usually at the heart of mainstream philosophy. Piergiorgio Donatelli's essay locates cinema and the magic of films within Cavell's thought. Donatelli claims that cinema is born at the peak of the modernist period of other arts, in crisis and forced to confront the conditions of their own reality, and exists from its beginning in a modernist state but with the promise of a new world for its audience. What is fundamental to cinema, ontologically speaking, is making a world present to us while screening its existence from us. In doing so, cinema displaces our lives and reveals the existential, non-philosophical problem of scepticism that inexorably looms over them. But, argues Donatelli, cinema thus prepares us — also through the film stars that populate it and offer companionship and models of singularity — for returning to our everyday lives with a genuine sense of the responsibilities we have towards our words and actions. So cinema exists, in fact, between romanticism and modernism, as it works to maintain our alignment with others and the world while naturally testing it (especially in classical Hollywood films, on the ground of its inherent democratic potential, and differently from European arts of the same period, convincingly documents Donatelli). From an ethical perspective, thus explains Donatelli, our experience with films — or, perhaps more restrictedly, with classical Hollywood films, in Cavell's account — is one of moral perfectionism, though an experience that is weakened or absent in particular cinematographic ages.

In the last essay of Part II, David Rudrum focuses on Cavell's "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting," a piece on the philosophy of — or, even, on philosophy as – collecting, republished in *Here and There*.[8] Drawing on Virginia Woolf's description of her visit to Carlyle's house, Rudrum starts by unknotting the apparent paradox that, in collecting, we accumulate what is at once an emblem of a life lived and a mark of death: what we do is reconstructing the self (or selves) from the belongings we collect in a sort of detective work. He then moves on to explore

8. Cavell, "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting," in *Here and There*, 33-71.

Cavell's reading of a story by Henry James about people visiting — or going on a secular pilgrimage to — Shakespeare's birthplace and carefully unpacks Cavell's main claim that that story is a model of the nature and activity of criticism, along the lines of the appeal to ordinary language central to Cavell's philosophy. Finally, Rudrum arrives at Thoreau's *Walden* cabin and expands his investigation, through Cavell's writings, of the grammar of collecting and, with that, recollecting, and saving or bringing back from forgetfulness. On these bases, claims Rudrum, we should re-interpret the way museums and curators put their collections on exhibit for visitors, seen as ordinary critics.

As with Part I, we hope these essays will make aspects of Cavell's philosophy, or routes departing from it, salient, or salient anew, for readers curious to start a conversation with him or prone to pick up where they have left it. If you think something is wrong in what you are about to read, either from an exegetical or a theoretical perspective, please, tell a friend why and figure out together how to do it better. If you think something of Cavell's rich production is disgracefully left out here, please, write about it, and about why it merits scholars' attention in the current philosophical landscape. If you think you do not know what to think of these essays, or more generally, of Cavell's philosophy as a whole, please, take a rest and try again later, not because we want it to sound convincing, but because there is more to learn about it and your stance toward it by opening your ears rather than by closing them to it. So, be ready to offer criticism, but make sure that you acknowledge its terms, first and foremost for yourself. Nothing else but this is what the editors and the contributors wish for with this Special Issue.

FRANCESCO GANDELLINI, FILIPPO CASATI AND GORDON BEARN

I. Philosophy and Self-Knowledge

1. A Gift of Common Words: The World Working Out in Cavell's Inheritance of Austin

STEVEN G. AFFELDT

The inclusion in *Here and There* of "Notes After Austin" — Cavell's brief memoir of his short but transformative relationship with J.L. Austin — provides an opportunity to reconsider the place of Austin in Cavell's work. Other figures (e.g., Wittgenstein, Emerson, and Shakespeare) bulk larger and appear more continuously, but arguably none is more philosophically decisive than Austin; the only figure Cavell calls his "teacher." Cavell adopted or adapted a range of specific Austinian results, concepts, and procedures that figure importantly in his work: he adopts Austin's attention to "the jump of words" in philosophy; adapts Austin's implicit account of the function of criteria in judgment for his reading of Wittgenstein; employs Austin's description of ordinary epistemic inquiry to frame his diagnosis of traditional epistemology; and, to mention only one further instance, extends Austin's account of the performative to articulate an order of speech he names passionate utterance. However, Austin's importance for Cavell lies deeper than any such specific points of influence — vital as they certainly are — and is measured by the fact that it was through encountering Austin that Cavell "began finding [his] intellectual voice."[1] This is more than discovering his particular academic niche or professional métier. Encountering Austin allowed Cavell to move beyond a condition he describes as "wild with muteness" — filled with impressions and desires but unable to find, or to believe in, his capacity to express them intelligibly (to himself or others) — and granted him an access to his own language in which he could, for the first time, begin to discover and

1. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.

express himself philosophically.[2] Hence, he tells us, "Austin's philosophizing allowed me — demanded of me — the use of myself as the source of [philosophy's] evidence and as an instance of its conclusions. Whatever philosophy's pertinence to me, I felt for the first time my pertinence to philosophy."[3]

At one level, these remarks report a personal breakthrough. Cavell faced autobiographical/clinical impediments to conviction in his own intelligibility and pertinence to philosophy (or anything else), and Austin's philosophizing helped him overcome them. At another level, however, they must (also) be read more generally. Not only are Cavell's autobiographical considerations philosophically informed (presenting moments of his life through the lens of the philosophical understandings they helped inspire), they are also explicitly directed toward re-shaping our views of philosophy and autobiography and challenging the opposition between them.[4] But further, there is clearly nothing about Cavell that makes him, as an individual person, especially or distinctively pertinent to philosophy. Indeed, recognizing the equal pertinence of all to philosophy is a linchpin of "Must We Mean What We Say?" — the earliest philosophical fruit of Cavell's encounter with Austin.

In this essay, I explore what Cavell found in Austin that allowed him to discover his philosophical voice and pertinence to philosophy. I begin from the autobiographical crises of expression and intelligibility that, in his recounting, the encounter with Austin resolved (or began to resolve). However, my interest is not speculative biography and my focus is not, ultimately, simply on Cavell himself. My aim, rather, is to follow Cavell's own suggestion that Austin's work allowed him to discover his philosophical voice precisely because it represented a wholly general return of the human voice to philosophy.[5] Accordingly, in considering what Cavell found in Austin I will also be considering the Austinian roots of his understanding of

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2. Ibid., 49.
3. Cavell, "Notes After Austin" in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Saundra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 102.
4. See, for example, his remark early in *A Pitch of Philosophy*: "If the following autobiographical experiments are philosophically pertinent, they must confront the critical with the clinical, which means distrust both as they stand, I mean distrust their opposition" (8).
5. In *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell's puts the thought this way: "In practice, [...] the moment I felt that something about ordinary language philosophy was giving me a voice in philosophy, I knew that the something was the idea of a return of voice to philosophy, that asking myself what I say when, letting that matter, presented itself as a defiance of philosophy's interest in language, as if what philosophy meant by logic demanded, in the name of rationality, the repression of voice (hence of confession, hence of autobiography)," 69.

the nature and power of ordinary language, of how it enables a recovery of the ordinary human voice, and of their pertinence to philosophy.

1.

Cavell regards the child in Augustine's account of acquiring language that opens Wittgenstein's *Investigations* as profoundly isolated; adrift among elders who neither evince interest in its presence nor provide encouraging responses to its efforts and from whom it must, in effect, steal the language with which it will endeavor to make itself understood. The tales of his own childhood in *A Pitch of Philosophy* and *Little Did I Know* reveal the autobiographical underpinnings of this interpretive perspective. They too depict an isolated child, repeatedly uprooted by cross-country moves, who is blessed with a wild intelligence that, however, sets him apart both intellectually and physically since he skips several grades and is noticeably younger than his classmates. But the deeper isolation is at home, where he is left alone for much of most days and evenings and where pervasive hostilities between his parents produce what Cavell calls "periods of locked speechlessness with each other, and with me"; leaving him the impossible task of acquiring/stealing language from alternately antagonistic or mute elders. In these recurrent periods, Cavell says, he not only thought his parents were mad but "wondered the same about [himself]." In his "absorption of their opposite griefs," he continues, he became "as unintelligible to [himself] as if [he] had not learned speech."[6] Hence, as with the "figure of the mad child" in Augustine, Cavell presents himself too as "lacking language, lacking the means of making himself intelligible or [...] expressing his desires."[7]

Throughout much of his early life, what relieved Cavell's isolation and suspicions of madness was music; whether listening, performing, or later composing. Music provided intelligibility and community. It formed the substance of his relationship with his mother (a glamorous professional pianist with perfect pitch), provided an identity as a band leader in high school, and allowed him to build

6. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 22.
7. Ibid., 36.

enduring relationships with individuals that, given his times and his circumstances, he would not otherwise have known (e.g., as the only white member of a black jazz band). Further, music provided an arena for Cavell's powerful ambition and a vehicle for his exceptional virtuosity as a performer; even if the magnitude of that virtuosity sometimes also isolated him.[8] Accordingly, Cavell's realization, shortly after beginning to study composition at Juilliard, that music was not his path represented a crescendo to the ongoing crises of identity and intelligibility that had constituted much of his life.

In Cavell's telling, two kinds of reasons underlay his decision to abandon a life in music. First, he did not reliably believe in his capacity to express himself musically. He did not doubt his technical proficiency or, in one sense, his creativity. Rather, he judged the music he had composed for his successful Juilliard application to be "without consequence. It had its moments," he allows, but "said next to nothing I could, or wished to, believe."[9] Cavell came to see that his exceptional talent had allowed him to skirt the question of whether he was, or wished to be, invested in a life of music. He had not, he realized, "chosen [his] life or suffered it to choose [him]" but had merely "accepted the tow of a certain talent."[10] For this reason, he did not feel himself staked in or expressed by his music and the successes he achieved – the significance of which were attested to by leading composers of the time – struck him as "accidental" and, therefore, "fraudulent."[11] Second, Cavell recoils from the exclusivity of the realm of intelligibility he finds in music. During his sophomore year at Berkeley, in Ernest Bloch's music theory class, Cavell tells us he first experienced a kind of rapture that would drive him from class "into the adjacent hills for an hour or

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8. This is epitomized in Cavell's story of a party during his second-year teaching at Berkeley at which he and a new acquaintance are playing a four-hand Schubert quartet. This was Cavell's first time playing the piece and, as they move into the development section of the first movement, he notices that his partner "was somehow restive on the bench." "Without stopping playing," Cavell says, "he rather shouted at me: 'Are you *reading?*' meaning reading this at sight for the first time." Cavell is flushed, stops playing, and makes an excuse to leave the gathering. Reflecting on this moment, Cavell remarks that "instead of connection [he] felt an estrangement from his display of some talent." Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 190.
Interestingly, virtuosity in sight-reading links Cavell with his mother about whom he remarks that what "was truly legendary about her playing [...] was he uncanny ability to sight-read." Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 18.
9. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 223.
10. Ibid., 187.
11. Ibid., 224 and 246.

so of solitude, as if [he] had become too consecrated to touch."[12] But it was in these same moments of rapture and "feeling for the first time intelligible," that Cavell realized the world of music was "not quite to be [his]."[13] The exclusivity of music arose for Cavell in connection with the critical issue of having an ear and was exemplified for him by Bloch's asking his students whether they could hear the difference between an original Bach four-part chorale and a rendering with one note altered by a half-step. Cavell reports that he heard the difference and so possessed the key to music's intelligible world. However, he says:

> The assigned question of hearing, or an ear, produced a private triumph, and spoke decisively, unforgettably, of a world of culture beyond the standing construction of the world. Yet I did not want this transcendence of culture to require a comparatively rare talent, even a competition of talents, in order to participate.[14]

Hence, while Cavell was ecstatic at the promise of intelligibility he experienced in music, he sought a realm of intelligibility and a world of culture accessible to all.

Since music had provided Cavell's most palpable experiences of intelligibility and community, the trauma of discovering that it was not to be his life will be plain. Cavell reports asking himself "quite explicitly whether [he] might be going to pieces and [that he] seemed to decide that [he] didn't know how"; a thought, he continues, "that sounds quite compatible with having gone to pieces."[15] One measure of his trauma and sense of going to pieces is that it was as a musician that Cavell gave himself his name. Born Stanley Goldstein, at 16 he changed his name to Cavell; first experimentally adopting it as a stage name during a summer performing with a travelling band and then making the change legally upon returning home. In one quite literal sense then, Cavell's giving up his vision of a life in music was giving up the thing that made him who he was or, at least, that made him what he was called. And, indeed, his Austin-informed appreciation that there is a more intimate and

12. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 49.
13. Ibid., 49.
14. Ibid., 50.
15. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 226.

essential relation than we might imagine between what a thing is *called* and what a thing *is* leads him to speak of his "experience of the unfathomableness of the consequences for identity in adopting a name."[16]

2.

Following what ultimately proved to be a productive breakdown in New York City (occupied primarily with reading and watching movies) and a three-year sojourn as a graduate student at UCLA, Cavell entered the graduate program in philosophy at Harvard where, in the spring of 1955, he encountered Austin who had been invited to deliver the William James Lectures and to lead a seminar on the subject of excuses. The immediate "practical result" of this encounter, Cavell tells us, was that he abandoned "beginnings and plans for a perfectly good Ph.D. dissertation" on the concept of an action in Kant and Spinoza.[17] This echoed his abandonment of composition at Juilliard and, again, his decision turned on judging that the work he had begun did not implicate or express *him*. The dissertation, he says, was "good enough to have earned the degree but not good enough to have given me what I variously imagined as a voice, a way, a subject, a work of my own."[18] However, in this case, abandoning the dissertation was not simply an ending but the beginning of a new path forward in which Cavell abandoned himself to the philosophical promise he was discovering in Austin.[19]

Cavell's abandonment to Austin's philosophical practice is ultimately tied to his conviction that it will allow him to discover and draw upon his own philosophical voice. However, he is also drawn by the fact that it provides forms of pleasure and gratification he had found in music. For him, he remarks, it is "as if philosophy occurs [...] as some form of compensation for, or perhaps continuation of, the life of

16. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 43. There is, of course, a further sense in which Cavell's identity is formed in relation to music; for it is arguable that his life in music fundamentally conditioned the kind of philosopher he became.
17. Ibid., 55.
18. Ibid.
19. See Cavell's remark: "The depression in this decision to stop what I was doing [i.e. his beginning dissertation] was less magnified than it might have been in repeating that of my decision almost ten years earlier to put away my beginnings as a composer, because this time there was an associated exhilaration in clearing the ground" (*A Pitch of Philosophy*, 55).

music."[20] This is an extraordinary claim, inviting us to consider Cavell's work as a whole as, in various ways, representing a continuation of the life of music. While I cannot here accept that invitation, I will note several aspects of Austin's practice that are quite clearly related to some of what Cavell had found in music.

Most immediately, Cavell remarks that "[w]orking in Austin's classes was the time for me in philosophy when the common rigors of exercise acquired the seriousness and playfulness — the continuous mutuality — that I had counted on in musical performance."[21] However, while he was filled with delight at the time, he later came to suspect that the reliable availability of this mutuality in seriousness and playfulness meant "that what was happening in Austin's classes was not, as it lay, quite philosophy."[22] Cavell does not elaborate this judgment, but the thought seems to be that charting structures of our agreement in words without also examining our propensity to violate that agreement (a propensity Austin's work reveals as clearly as it reveals the structures of our agreement) is to miss the philosophical moment. The pleasure of Austin's practice, it seems, may tempt us to treat philosophy too much like the life of music; a life in which musicians do not endlessly fall afoul of the musical structures that enable their mutuality.

Cavell also explicitly links the appeal of Austin's practice for him with the important matter of having an ear. "That Austin's practice had to do, in its own way, with the possession of an ear," he tells us, "was surely part of its authority for me."[23] This is a way of understanding Cavell's praise of Austin's "constant fastidiousness of mind" as expressed in his (sometimes theatrically British) insistence on correct usage, his clear delight in drawing distinctions ("the finer the merrier"), and in what Austin himself speaks of as the "pleasure and instruction" of "drawing the coverts of the microglot" and "hounding down the minutiae."[24] For Austin's endless appetite for minutiae and his constant challenge to recognize the philosophical significance of what we may have thought *mere* minutiae, places similar kinds of demands on the ability to

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20. Ibid., 11.
21. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 102-103.
24. See Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102; Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 102, and J.L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in *Philosophical Papers,* 3rd ed., ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175.

hear differences as Cavell had encountered in Bloch's music classes. Cavell's rediscovery of these kinds of demands in Austin's work — and his clear ability to meet them — must have produced a similar breath-taking rapture. However, while he clearly delights in Austin's exercises of the ear — evincing evident pleasure in reports of Austin devoting an entire meeting of a recurring discussion group to the distinction between signing "Yours sincerely" and "Yours truly" — he also insists that the philosophical power of Austin's work did not lie in drawing fine distinctions. Rather, Cavell remarks, Austin's purpose in drawing distinctions "resembles the art critic's purpose in comparing and distinguishing works of art, namely, that in this crosslight the capacities and salience of an individual object in question are brought to attention and focus."[25] The power of Austin's distinctions, then, lay not in their being "fine" but in their being "natural" and "penetrat[ing] the phenomena they record."[26] Accordingly, the Austinian test of the ear is not a matter of discriminating fine differences — matters, say, of a half step — but of recognizing what is *natural* and what not.

Connected to the issue of ear, Austin's procedures also afforded Cavell a forum for a kind of virtuosity. In one sense, the idea of virtuosity is at odds with ordinary language procedures since their coherence demands that, given a well-described situation of ordinary speech, all native speakers of a language are equally competent regarding what we can say and mean in that situation. There are, then, no virtuosi of ordinary language. However, some are more adept at producing examples of speech that illuminate our ordinary language, and this is where Cavell discovered a kind of virtuosity. This was surely tied to his powers of imagination and his ability to create compelling contexts of speech. But it was also, and more importantly, tied to his capacities for hearing the tunes of ordinary use; something we might regard as a linguistic kin to perfect pitch. In the realms of musical performance, Cavell's virtuosity frequently isolated and embarrassed him. However, his virtuosity in the realm of ordinary language enhanced and extended the scope of mutual intelligibility. It also clearly mattered to him that his abilities attracted a measure of personal favor with Austin and that, as he tells us, he had gained "some credit with [Austin] for [his] knack at producing examples he found pertinent."[27]

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25. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 103.
26. Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," 102-103.
27. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 103.

3.

From these individual/biographical respects in which Austin's work represented continuations of Cavell's life in music, I now begin exploring more representative dimensions of his response to Austin. In that regard, the most immediate and important starting point is Cavell's explicitly tying his discoveries of his (philosophical) voice and pertinence to philosophy to his experience of Austin's "inexhaustible faith in the philosophical yield of the details of the language we share and that shares us."[28] For this link suggests that coming to claim our capacity for (representative or philosophical) speech rests upon achieving a particular understanding of, and relation to, our ordinary language. But in order to appreciate how Cavell's experience of Austin's "inexhaustible faith" could have had its transformative power, we need to gather some sense of the vision of ordinary language underlying that faith. To this end, I will consider three central claims Austin advances in recommending his ways of attending to our language.[29]

First, Austin claims that "our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetime of many generations" and, he continues, since these distinctions and connections have "stood the long test of survival of the fittest," they are likely to be not only more numerous but "more sound [...] and more subtle [...] than any that you or I are likely to think up."[30] Considering these remarks, we may be tempted to focus critical attention on Austin's "all" and to probe his basis for claiming that our common stock of words embodies *all* the distinctions and connections we have found worth making. However, the importance — and interest — of Austin's claim falls more heavily on "worth." Although he does not elaborate the point — moving past it quite quickly in order to emphasize the soundness and subtlety of our distinctions and connections — his claim is that all of the distinctions and

28. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
29. I draw exclusively from "A Plea for Excuses" since it contains Austin's most continuous discussion of his methods. I should emphasize that this manner of gathering a sense of Austin's vision is a decided second-best. He regarded it as sufficiently evident that "there is gold in them thar hills" that he was largely unconcerned to offer abstract theoretical justifications of his practices (Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 181). The best way of coming to appreciate Austin's vision is to follow the concrete details of his investigations. However, that is not possible here.
30. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 182.

connections embodied in our common stock of words reflect judgments of value or significance. This marks a radical departure from the passivity and value-neutrality of classical empiricists views of language according to which "ideas" and relations among "ideas" are determined by the "impressions" we receive from the world as it impinges upon our senses and the blank slate of our minds. For classical empiricists, the importance, value, or significance of ideas and relations among ideas is simply a function of the intensity, frequency, and regularity of the sensory impacts we receive. For Austin, however, rather than reflecting value-neutral impressions of the world upon us, our common stock of words and the distinctions and connections they embody express what we speakers find impressive. They express what in our social and material worlds we judge worth calling out or worth remarking (remarkable), what attracts or draws our attention, excites, awakens, or holds our attention; in short, what matters to us. The order of our common words, then, expresses and reveals an order of shared human value.[31]

Second, Austin insists that 'linguistic' philosophy cannot be charged with ignoring the world (reality, phenomena) and concerning itself "simply" with language. Rather, he contends, "[w]hen we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking [...] not *merely* at words (or at 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about."[32] In considering, for example, how we use 'voluntary' and 'involuntary,' when we would *say* that an action was done voluntarily or involuntarily, we are considering what voluntary and involuntary actions *are*. Hence, Austin suggests, it may be more accurate to call his philosophical methods "linguistic phenomenology" in order to highlight the fact that "we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of [...] the phenomena."[33]

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31. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell develops these same kinds of ideas in claiming that Wittgensteinian criteria express what counts; a claim that blossoms into full-flower as he elaborates a two-page weave of relations among counting and accounting and telling and tallying and that culminates in the judgment that "valuing underwrites asserting." See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 94-95. In *Little Did I Know*, 497-98, Cavell offers a brief but delightful reflection on relations between ideas of impression and of being impressed. I discuss that reflection and some of its implications in my essay "Impression, Influence, Appreciation," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 243-60.
32. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 182.
33. Ibid., 182.

The idea that our uses of words reveal the nature of phenomena is fundamental to Austin's vision of, and work with, ordinary language. It is not always explicitly thematized or theoretically justified, but it is relied upon whenever he moves seamlessly from speaking of words to speaking of things. It also, however, aroused deep suspicion among his positivist critics who accused him of proceeding as though philosophy could dispense with the difficult empirical work of investigating the world and, instead, reveal its structure from the comfort of our armchairs. Austin is clearly alive to this kind of concern, but his concessive allowance that our uses of words are not the "final arbiter" of phenomena seems to be beside the point; for the question is how words can be any arbiter of phenomena at all.[34] In this regard, Cavell's defense of Austin in "Must We Mean What We Say?" is more helpful by drawing out a crucial idea implicit in Austin's insistence that our language expresses our values. Cavell, emphasizes that language is an embodied human phenomenon that we grow into or acquire along with growing into our world. If our ability to discover "something about the world by hunting in the dictionary [...] seems surprising," he remarks, "perhaps it is because we forget that we learn language and learn the world *together*, that they become elaborated and distorted together, and in the same places."[35] Of course some kinds of things can only be learned by investigating the world — Cavell mentions a person's name and address, the contents of a will or of a bottle, and whether frogs eat butterflies. However, there is much else that we can learn about "what kind of object anything is," as Wittgenstein puts it, by examining how we use our words.[36] To take Cavell's example, we can learn what an umiak *is* by learning what the word "umiak"*means* — "a large open boat made of skins stretched on a wooden frame, used by Eskimos."[37] We can do so, Cavell explains, because "[w]hen we turned to the dictionary for "umiak" we already knew everything about the word, as it were, but its combination; we knew what a noun is and how to name an object and how to look up a word and what boats are and what

34. Cavell makes a similar point: Austin's "repeated disclaimer that ordinary language is certainly not the last word, 'only it is the *first* word', [...] is reassuring only during polemical enthusiasm. For the issue is why the first, or *any*, word can have the kind of power Austin attributes to it" (Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," 102).
35. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 19.
36. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. and trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968), §373.
37. *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, deluxe 2nd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

an Eskimo is. We were," he continues, "all prepared for that umiak. What seemed like finding the world in a dictionary was really a case of bringing the world to the dictionary."[38]

The final Austinian point I will mention involves the nature of our agreement in language. This point emerges indirectly through his addressing one of the supposed "snags in 'linguistic' philosophy, which those not very familiar with it find, sometimes not without glee or relief, daunting."[39] He calls this the "snag of Loose (or Divergent or Alternative) Usage" and imagines it being expressed in the (knowing/ gleeful) questions: "Do we all say the same, and only the same, things in the same situations? Don't usages differ?".[40] The intended force of this supposed snag is that we cannot meaningfully rely on ordinary language in philosophy — or in any other serious endeavor — because we do not agree in how we ordinarily speak; our ordinary uses of words are too varied, inconsistent, and haphazard for any conclusions to be based upon them. In response, Austin allows that "people's usages do vary, and we do talk loosely, and we do say different things apparently indifferently."[41] However, he continues, our usages do not vary "nearly as much as one would think."[42] In the "great majority" of cases in which we had thought we wanted "to say different things of and in *the same* situation," closer examination reveals that "we had simply imagined the situation *slightly* differently."[43] Indeed, Austin suggests that one reason excuses are especially valuable objects of study is that they are offered in "just the sort of situation where we might be inclined to think people will say 'almost anything,' because they are so flurried, or so anxious to get off."[44] But even in the realm of excuses, he claims, there is an extraordinarily high degree of order and agreement in how we judge our words should be used; a claim he then goes some way toward

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38. Cavell, "Must We Mean," 19-20. In his desire to defend Austinian ordinary language procedures, Cavell is perhaps not sufficiently careful about the senses in which it is and is not correct that I have learned, for example, what an umiak is by learning the definition of the word. I *have* learned that it is a kind of boat, that it differs from a kayak in being open, and I may be able to recognize one encountered in the wild. This is not nothing. However, even without venturing into a Heideggerian Black Forest of jugs, bridges, and boots, we must also recognize that what an umiak is for people who "dwell" with them is hardly touched by its dictionary definition.
39. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 183.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 183. After all, as he remarks in another context, "we are not all (terribly or sufficiently) strictly brought up" (Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers*, 77).
42. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 183.
43. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 183-84.
44. Ibid., 184.

supporting with his famous tale of two donkeys, one mine and one yours, and when we should say I shot yours by accident and when by mistake.

These remarks about agreement highlight two (connected) aspects of Austin's vision of our lives in language. First, the agreement to which Austin points is not descriptive but normative. He is not reporting empirical findings about our speech, and when we respond to his examples and questions we are neither predicting what we (or others) will say nor reporting what we (or others) have said. Rather, Austin is revealing our agreement in what it is *right* (correct or natural) to say, what we *should* say in the specific circumstances he presents, and he is also revealing, at least implicitly, *why* it is right. Second, in illustrating specific instances of agreement, Austin is revealing that our agreement in language is, to use Wittgensteinian terms, expressive of our pervasive agreement in judgment and form of life. This can be seen through the vital role of examples and "background stories" in eliciting agreement. If we consider our words and how they are to be used apart from specific examples or stories, our views of their uses and meanings may be uncertain, divergent and those uses themselves may seem arbitrary, ungrounded, or without reason. However, since our lives in language express our pervasive agreement in judgment and form of life, when we situate words within a specific (real or imagined) context of human life, we find clarity and agreement — even if that context is one we never have, and never will, encounter. We know *how* the words should be used, *what* they mean, and, at least implicitly, *why* they are the right words in this context. Hence Austin insists on the importance of imagining situations "in detail, with a background story," and urges that "it is worth employing the most idiosyncratic or, sometimes, boring means to stimulate and to discipline our wretched imaginations."[45]

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Considering these elements of Austin's vision of language was to help us recognize representative dimensions of Cavell's response to that vision in his discovery of his own voice and philosophical pertinence. In returning to this issue, however, I once

45. Ibid.

again begin from a point particular to Cavell; namely, a moment in his autobiography in which he directly links his experiences of leaving music and encountering Austin and also, quite importantly, describes each event as producing its own kind of crisis. The passage begins with a point I noted earlier: "In reaching the crisis of giving up my search for a relation to music that mattered to me in the way I would come to imagine a life of the mind could matter to me," Cavell remarks, "I discovered that I had never, as I might say, chosen my life, or suffered its choosing me, but accepted the tow of a certain talent."[46] He then continues:

> The crisis precipitated by Austin's appearance on the scene, in contrast, left me with a set of fragments that seemed to have some obscure but essential relation to the expression of my desire for a world. In the former case (the silencing of meaning in music) I felt I had misplaced the world; in the latter case (the philosophical questioning of meaning in everyday speech) I felt disoriented with the discovery of a further world.[47]

To my ear, this description rings of Cavell's Wittgenstein and Emerson. It shows Cavell, like the child of the Augustinian tale that opens the *Investigations*, acquiring the capacity to speak by gathering fragments he obscurely senses will enable him to express his own desire. And, as in Cavell's Emerson, acquiring that capacity to speak is tied to the discovery of a further world. It is tied, that is, to the discovery of the internal principles informing phenomena and, with that, reaching a transfigured appreciation of the meaning, purpose, and coherence of our familiar world.[48] But even without insisting on these echoes, this much is clear: prior to meeting Austin, Cavell despaired of any possibility of making himself intelligible (to himself or

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46. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 187.
47. Ibid.
48. See, for example, one of Cavell's most frequently cited passages from Emerson's "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 68-69: "Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the form and gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; […] and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle; there is no puzzle; but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench."

others). The language, and therefore also the world, offered by his parents were private, broken, locked in antagonism and his efforts to inherit that language and orient himself in that world drove him to wonder whether he was mad. The language and world he found in music were ordered, coherent, and offered ecstasies of expressive beauty. However, partly because he experienced this order and beauty as rarified and exclusive, Cavell discovers that this language and world are not, finally, those in which he can find and express himself. However, Austin's repeated, specific, and utterly convincing illustrations of the reason animating our uses of words and of the depth and intimacy of our pervasive agreement in language, project a language and world in which intelligibility is possible. Austin's examples provide Cavell a perspective on his own language from which he recognizes the power of our common words in their ordinary uses. He discovers that, in so far as he entrusts himself to the order of our ordinary language, he not only *can* be intelligible but his intelligibility is all but inescapable; he must mean what he says.[49]

The pleasures of work with Austin that, for Cavell himself, represented compensations for or continuations of his life in music, can be recognized as rooted in this this vision of language and so available to all. The seriousness, playfulness, and continuous mutuality that Cavell prized in Austin's classes and associated with his experience of musical performance, depend on and express a willingness to attentively entrust ourselves to the shared language that holds us in common. And the pleasures of an ear for ordinary language, in which Cavell found a non-musical form of virtuosity, will also be open to all. In attending to what we say, we discover and map the contours of the reason animating our speech and so experience the pleasure of becoming (more fully) intelligible to ourselves. This is a place for Cavell's insistence that, unlike a descriptive linguist gathering empirical observations of how some group speaks, in Austin's practice of attending to ordinary language, "one is not finally interested *at all* in how 'other' people talk, but in determining where and why one wishes, or hesitates, to use a particular expression oneself."[50]

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49. Indeed, in light of Austin's work, Cavell realizes that it is not *achieving* intelligibility but *defeating* intelligibility that requires special efforts. In this regard, see his essay on Beckett, written in the immediate wake of his encounter with Austin, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 115-62.
50. Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," 99.

The idea that the procedures of ordinary language philosophy allow us to *discover* why we speak as we do has two levels, and distinguishing them will move us further into Cavell's conception of discovering or claiming one's own voice. At one level, we discover the existence of, and the reasons for, normative patterns in our uses of words. For example, Austin points out that our ordinary uses embody a principle he formulates as "no modification without aberration"; that is, "for the *standard* case covered by any normal verb, no modifying expression is required or even permitted." In coming to recognize this principle, we reach a new understanding of our speech and of why, for example, we resist calling a yawn at bedtime intentional, unintentional, voluntary, involuntary, deliberate, or anything else. It was just a yawn and, as Austin notes, to "yawn in any such peculiar way [i.e., intentionally, unintentionally, etc.] is just not to just yawn."[51] But at a further level, precisely because our uses of words are governed by a normative order that we sustain but of which we are, to a large extent, not self-consciously aware, our uses of words can mean more than we know and can reveal us beyond what we know of ourselves. (Hence, as Cavell has argued, in calling upon us to examine what we say and why, the methods of ordinary language philosophy "are methods for acquiring self-knowledge"[52]). The idea that we stand revealed or exposed by our words is familiar in Cavell's writing on Wittgenstein and Emerson.[53] But it is equally central to his consideration of Austin. In *A Pitch of Philosophy* he speaks of an Austinian "pathos of the necessity of sense" which he glosses by saying "I may be understood by [my words] too well."[54] In philosophically considering our uses of words, our focus is often on how they convey what we understand ourselves to mean. However, in response to Austin's demonstration of a pathos of the necessity of sense, we are charged with the complimentary task of discovering reaches of what we must mean beyond what we had understood ourselves to mean, and of doing so by attending to the ranges of sense carried by our words themselves in the contexts in which we use them.

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51. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," 189-90.
52. Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 66.
53. See especially, for Wittgenstein, Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* and, for Emerson, "The Philosopher in American Life."
54. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 73.

Cavell's extends these ideas in speaking of Austin revealing that "I am abandoned to [my words], as to thieves, or conspirators, taking my breath away."[55] These remarks highlight our subjection to the independent life of words, to their agency, and emphasize that it is in abandoning ourselves to our words that we, as it were, receive the breath we use to express ourselves. While this may chasten our dreams of private control or power (as though thieves have robbed us of that), by suggesting that our meaning is sustained and carried on the common air, it also affirms our expressive power. In this light, the issue of achieving or claiming one's own (philosophical) voice may be framed in these terms: If my capacity to mean at all demands allowing my words to be carried on the common air, how is *my* voice defined or distinguished within a generalized and howling gale?

Cavell's central direction of response builds on, but also moves beyond, Austin. He emphasizes that we cannot achieve our individual voice by trying to separate ourselves from ordinary language and the order of meaning and value it embodies; for that simply leaves us breathless and so voiceless. Rather than through efforts to stand out or to *assert* ourselves, we achieve our individual voices through practices of, or forms of, listening or reading; that is, through more closely attending to, and situating ourselves with respect to, what our shared language gives us to mean. Much of the work Cavell produced in the aftermath of his encounter with Austin can be understood as articulating and/or exemplifying various forms of this attending and situating. Here, I will briefly mention two ways in which Cavell engages these practices.

First, his claim in discussing Wittgenstein that he requires a "convening of [his] culture's criteria" expresses a demand to self-consciously attend to what his language gives him to mean. As children coming into language, we absorb a structure of values embodied in that language and its criteria. However, Cavell argues, our task in becoming adults is to bring these values to reflective consciousness and determine our stance toward them. This task, Cavell says, "warrants the name of philosophy" and describes "something we might call education."[56] In undertaking it,

55. Ibid., 125.
56. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

> I bring my own language and life into imagination [...] in order to confront [my culture's criteria] with my with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me.[57]

Second, one of Cavell's characteristic practices in writing exemplifies a mode of attending to and situating himself within our common language; namely, his practice of activating unexpected or over-looked dimensions of the meanings of familiar words. Frequently, he explicitly directs attention to these efforts — as, for example, when he details the economic valences of dozens of key terms in Thoreau's *Walden*. Often, however, Cavell leaves it to us to hear, or not, the ways in which he gives his voice its own inflection by sounding specific registers of the words he employs. Indeed, one such moment occurs in describing his Austinian awakening. As I noted earlier, Cavell explicitly ties the decisive discoveries of his (philosophical) voice and pertinence to philosophy to an experience of what he calls Austin's "inexhaustible faith in the philosophical yield of the details of the language we share and that shares us." But we catch something of Cavell's individual voice in recognizing that his slightly awkward formulation "and that shares us" activates valences of "shares" and "yields." In the verb form in which it appears here, "share" means to hold in common but also to divide, to cut, or to apportion. Cavell's faithfulness to the meaning of "share," then, lets him suggest that the language we hold in common and through which we divide, cut, or apportion the things of which we speak also divides, cuts, or apportions those of us it holds; uniting us and separating us. "Yield," in turn, speaks of gains and, more specifically, of the fruits of harvest (as produced with a plowshare) and so tells us that we will be nourished by cultivating faithful attention to the details of our language as it, in turn, cultivates us.

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These thoughts about achieving our own voice through hearkening to our common language form a natural pivot to considering, albeit briefly, how Cavell's account of

57. Ibid.

Austin's enabling him to discover his philosophical pertinence illuminates more general issues of the nature of philosophy and of philosophical pertinence. Several points have already emerged, either explicitly or implicitly: (1) as native speakers of our language, we are each philosophically pertinent sources of evidence regarding what we say and mean; (2) since our uses of words illuminate the nature of things, we can participate in the philosophical quest to understand phenomena and (3) in this way contribute to disclosing the "further world" of coherence and intelligibility that Cavell found promised in Austin's practice. Further, we have also seen that attending to our uses of language (4) serves the ancient philosophical quest for self-knowledge and (5) involves the reflective examination of values that is central to philosophy. Here, however, I want to focus simply on the call for attention to ordinary language and the (different) ways in which Austin and Cavell understand this call.

Austin's call for attention to ordinary language and, more specifically, his insistence on the meticulous examination of specific cases — his "policy of splitting hairs to avoid starting them" — marks a decisive departure from a tradition of philosophy he regards as fundamentally misdirected by outsized metaphysical ambitions and a hunger for the profound.[58] Indeed, Cavell calls "the craving for profundity" Austin's "mortal philosophical enemy."[59] At the same time, while Austin would be the first to insist that we should not assume we know in advance whether the problems occupying us are real and well-formed or where our philosophical efforts will bear most fruit, it is nevertheless the case that, in important respects, he remains a fairly traditional philosopher. Much of his work seeks to address familiar philosophical questions (about, for example, the nature of action, responsibility, knowledge, truth) and his call for attention to ordinary language is supported by familiar methodological considerations: since ordinary language reveals the nature of phenomena, careful attention to our uses will provide illumination and help avoid misconstruing either the phenomena or the nature of the issues we are seeking to address. Cavell shares these Austinian reasons for directing attention to ordinary language and, as I noted at the outset, adopts or adapts several of Austin's procedures and results in his own work. However, he also departs from Austin in ways that

58. Austin, "Other Minds," 76.
59. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 88.

deepen the call for attention to our ordinary language and, in so doing, importantly expand our understanding of philosophy as well as of our pertinence to it and its pertinence to us.

The point of departure centers around what Austin calls the "jump of words" — the fact that fully competent speakers frequently employ familiar words in ways that deviate from ordinary use and, in so doing, fall into confusion, illusion, or unrecognized emptiness. Cavell cites Austin's "inexhaustible interest" in this kind of jump as integral to his early conviction in his work.[60] However, he soon came to think that Austin lacked an adequate account of this phenomenon. His concern is not simply, as he illustrates in the second part of "Austin at Criticism," that the terms in which Austin criticizes philosophers' misuses of words fail to meet his own standards for the correct application of those terms — e.g., Austin's description of Moore as "mistaken" in his use of "could" does not match his own elaboration of the conditions under which something is characterized as a mistake. Cavell's larger criticism is that Austin has failed to take these recurrent jumps into confusion or nonsense sufficiently seriously. He has treated them as indicative of professional hazards of philosophy (with its craving for the profound) or as personal lapses on the part of the philosopher. However, if we bear in mind that these philosophers, like all speakers of the language, are fully competent and authoritative regarding the use of our common words, we recognize that these kinds of explanations are insufficient. They cannot account for the endless, and typically unrecognized, recurrence of such jumps. Under the growing influence of Wittgenstein, Cavell moves beyond Austin to argue that the jump of words is not an individual failing or a professional hazard but a feature of our human relation to ordinary language as such.[61] For Cavell, the leaps into nonsense that Austin and Wittgenstein help us recognize as occurring in philosophy reflect a wholly general human drive to repudiate our ordinary conditions of sense. Indeed, a key insight Cavell draws from Wittgenstein's discussion of Augustine is that if Augustine has somehow gone wrong in his account of acquiring language, and done so without realizing it, then any of us may "at any time [...] be speaking without

60. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
61. This, of course, is the burden of much of Cavell's interpretation of Wittgenstein in *The Claim of Reason* (and elsewhere) and marks what he calls skepticism.

knowing what our words mean, what their meaning anything depends upon, speaking, as it were, in emptiness."[62]

In this light, an essential task of philosophy becomes discovering departures from sense and leading words back to their ordinary grounds of meaning. Further, since we may be speaking in unrecognized emptiness "at any time," Cavell argues that "there is no point at which [philosophy] must, or even may, stop."[63] To be sure, philosophy is importantly occupied with addressing specific kinds of questions. However, Cavell's response to the vision of ordinary language he finds in Austin (and subsequently in Wittgenstein) leads him to regard philosophy as also, and more broadly, a practice of endless attentiveness to our ordinary language and, therefore, to the lives and world our language informs and that are informed by it. This practice centrally involves uncovering and correcting nonsense. But it is also directed more broadly toward awakening to, and appreciating, the richness, order, and coherence of our ordinary lives and experience. Indeed, one reason Cavell champions Austin's rejection of metaphysics and the philosophical craving for profundity is that they devalue our ordinary experience. Our attraction toward the metaphysical, Cavell suggests, expresses our skeptical conviction that "what happens to us is inherently trivial." It shows, he continues, "that we live as if our daily experience were not ours, or just because ours, of no general significance."[64] Here we discover the most important power of Austin's stories and examples. It is not simply, as Cavell remarks, that they make differences and relations among words "so lucid and so decisive that you shudder to think of your previous, torpid state of illusion."[65] It is also that, in the brilliant light they cast on narrowly focused sets of words, we recognize a promise that our ordinary language and ordinary lives are, as a whole, radiant with significance that we have barely touched — as though we are being invited into the discovery of a further world. It can be disorienting, but thrillingly so.

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62. Cavell, "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*," in *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 133.
63. Cavell, "Existentialism and Analytic Philosophy," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 213.
64. Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 105.
65. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 60.

6.

After an initial flurry of essays directly expressing Austin's influence, Cavell produced almost no work involving sustained engagement with Austin for nearly two decades. When he returned to Austin, first with "Notes After Austin" and then more extensively with *A Pitch of Philosophy*, the return is framed autobiographically; that is, as I traced in the opening sections of this essay, in the context of recounting how his encounter with Austin resolved a personal crisis and allowed him to discover his own philosophical voice and pertinence. But setting aside the personal crisis (or at least its specific shape), we can now see that Cavell's response to Austin is philosophically representative. For it shows how Austin's philosophy allows us all, and calls on us all, to awaken to our lives and experience as they are revealed in our ordinary speech. If that is philosophy, then all of us are pertinent to it and it is pertinent to us. It may be that nothing is more pertinent. But further, and as Cavell first began to argue in the context of reflecting on his relationship with Austin, philosophy understood in this way will be inseparable from autobiography; inseparable, that is, from attention to the concrete particulars of our individual experience.

With this in mind, I will close by looking at a moment in "Notes After Austin" in which Cavell offers a glimpse of Austin as a teacher. Cavell has emphasized that, for him, Austin's personal presence was crucial — thus acknowledging the fact that personal encounters, with all of their accidents of attraction, can determine the paths of our (philosophical) lives.[66] But beyond suggesting something of the quality of Austin's presence and how, as Cavell saw it, he could display "perfect spiritual tact," the moment I will consider illustrates how attending to our ordinary language can dispel isolating self-opacity and obscurity and provide illumination and mutuality.[67] It is the kind of moment with a teacher that can produce not only intellectual conversion but grateful devotion that lasts a lifetime.

In his seminar on excuses, Austin is distinguishing within modifiers used in characterizing accidents between "something's being just or simply or purely an

66. See Cavell, "Notes After Austin," 102.
67. Ibid., 105.

accident ([…] in which nothing further, or nothing more complex, is in play, or mixed in)" and a "mere or sheer accident (one to which you could be assigning undue significance, or one whose accidental quality is transparent."[68] In this context, Cavell reports, "a student interjected that *sheer* could not mean *transparent* because there is such a thing as sheer wool."[69] Upon hearing this interjection, Cavell continues, Austin "was taken by surprise, lifted his pipe to his mouth, and asked intently, 'Is there? What is it?'" to which questions, Cavell says, "the answer began immediately, but continued with a distinct ritardando: 'Well, it's a weave you can see through'."[70] Cavell speaks of this as "the sort of shocking moment, here in the hilarity of its sheer contradiction, that might cause conversion." Austin, he goes on, replied simply, "'Well, you can see through it'" while his "eyes that had been fixed wide with attention were now almost closed, and wrinkled at the corners, with satisfaction; the lips were pursed as if to keep from letting forth laughter; and the pipe came back up, the tip not quite to the mouth but to be punched lightly and repeatedly against the chin."[71] Here, Cavell concludes, "was serious mirth in progress." But what he sees as the perfection of the moment rests in his "utter faith […] that the mirth was impersonal, that here a class had witnessed not the private defeat of an individual's experience but the public victory of sweet and shared words – mirth over the happy fact that the world is working out and we are made for it."[72]

It is too obvious, of course, that the world does not always work out. Our endless drive to use our shared words apart from, or against, their ordinary conditions of sense means that we will not let it work out. Further, the fact that our language expresses a system of values that, inevitably, does not equally serve all means that, sometimes, we *should not* let it work out but should, instead, interrogate the terms in which it seems to do so. But this only adds reason to celebrate those occasions when it genuinely, and rightly, does. This, I think, must be part of Cavell's pleasure in recounting his memory of Austin accepting an impromptu invitation to take a turn at bat during the annual picnic and softball game of Harvard's Society of Fellows. He describes Austin removing his suit jacket, but "leaving his tie in place and

68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.

his French cuffs closed," and taking up a stiff stance, knees too straight, crowding the plate. Concerned that Austin might embarrass himself, Cavell is surprised that, swinging at the first pitch, he hit the ball "sharply over the second baseman's head [...] and made it to second standing up." Cavell concludes: "[A]s I write this I can still see him standing on second with a trace of a smile, as if with an appropriate pride at a moment exactly realized, the world working out and we made for it."[73]

In a similar vein, we might celebrate Cavell's improbable path from a childhood of mute desolation, through a fortunate encounter with Austin, to a life of endless philosophical wealth and productivity. His ways of accepting and building on Austin's gift of common words stand as a demanding exemplar of grateful responsiveness, and his successes provide hope that, with luck and fortunate encounters, the world can continue to work out.[74]

73. Ibid., 108.

74. An earlier version of this paper constituted my contribution to the most recent instance of a recurring conference on Cavell's work, *Constellations of the Ordinary: The Aesthetic Turn*, held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru in October 2023. I am grateful to Joel Backström, Gordon C.F. Bearn, Victor J. Krebs, Niklas Toivakainen, and Nancy Yousef for helpful comments and questions.

2. Acknowledgment Beyond Empathy: Reclaiming Stanley Cavell's Philosophy of the Ordinary

NAOKO SAITO

1. Introduction: Why Does Philosophy Matter to Us?

Stanley Cavell asks us to shift our manner of doing philosophy and, in so doing, makes us rethink why philosophy matters to us. *How* he says what he says illustrates how we might change aspects in our ways of seeing the other — the world and our own selves. And yet it is not easy to *explain* to other people *how* or *why* his words matter to us. To repeat what he says is futile: he asks us to find our own words in response to what he says and to test them in the eyes of others, including testing them against what Cavell himself has written.

In this paper, I have chosen to write about "Notes Mostly about Empathy" (hereafter cited as "Notes"),[1] not only because the topic of empathy sheds light on the heart of Cavell's philosophy of the ordinary but also because it exemplifies the way he does philosophy. The way he addresses empathy challenges us to rethink and re-see what it means to know the pain and suffering of other people — and, more broadly, how philosophy serves the happiness of ordinary people.

Today, the tragedy of human blindness has regained a momentum. On the one hand, especially undergoing the worldwide spread of COVID-19, our societies suffer from problems of isolation and solitude[2] band from the existential anxiety of

1. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).
2. See, e.g., Mitsuki Ishida, *Society in Anxiety for Isolation: Gap in Connections, Desire for Recognition and Fear of Solitude* (Tokyo: Keiso-shobo, 2018) (Japanese); *Sociology of Solitude: Prescription for Relationless Society* (Tokyo: Keiso-shobo. 2011) (Japanese); Ichiro Kishimi, *Philosophy of Solitude: To Have the "Courage to Live"* (Tokyo: Chuo-Koron Publishers, 2022) (Japanese).

"ambiguous loss."[3] Such anxiety can work as a barrier to empathizing with the pain and suffering of others. On the other hand, according to Michael Sandel, the root cause of social division is the tyranny of meritocracy, where "ugly emotions" such as loss of dignity and lack of self-confidence have produced a "politics of humiliation."[4] Sandel's analysis exposes a blindness in the liberal politics of the technocrat, which fails to see society as a whole. Why is it that, however much we extoll the significance of empathy, we *fail to see* the suffering and pain of the other? *How* can we *learn to empathize with the other*?

It is against this background that Cavell's "Notes" shows its contemporary relevance. In order to show this, I shall first, in the following, examine Cavell's discussion, in Chapter 12 of *Here and There*, of the idea of empathy that he finds in Bennett Simon's book, *Tragic Drama and the Family*.[5] The way Cavell thematizes empathy, I shall suggest, provides an entry into his idea of acknowledgment, which emerges as a richly significant aspect of his philosophy of the ordinary. Second, in connection with the cultivation of way of knowing the other that acknowledges separation as inherent in the human condition, I shall discuss Cavell's Wittgensteinian idea of an "attitude towards a soul." In conclusion, I shall summarize the way he practices *philosophy as a way of life*.

2. Empathy as an Entry Into Cavell's Philosophy of the Ordinary

It is tempting to appeal to empathy when we confront the suffering and pain of others. Surely it is an ordinary concept, which is accessible to anyone. Who can deny its significance? It sounds almost inhuman to doubt its value. Cavell, however, disturbs this apparently stable concept of empathy. These notes are remarks on Bennett Simon's book, *Tragic Drama and the Family* (1993). In this book, Simon describes literary tragedies including plays of Shakespeare and highlights the

3. See Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and *The Myth of Closure: Ambiguous Loss in a Time of Pandemic and Change* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2022).
4. Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 25. See also Michael Young, *The Rise of Meritocracy* (New York: Routledge, 1982).
5. Bennett Simon, *Tragic Drama and the Family. Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett* (London: Yale University Press, 1993).

significance of empathy and the way that this grows in the audience. Cavell, however, casts doubt on this as follows: "the very attractiveness and immediacy of the idea that the audience of a great play is in a position, or space, that allows the capacity for empathy to grow somehow made me uneasy with the idea of empathy as a task of feeling into something or to someone."[6] From here, he tries to show how the concept of empathy creates "a sense of looseness or disorderliness" and why he had been avoiding appealing to this concept.[7] Rather than allowing us to get into the mind of the other, empathy can block the knowledge it claims, he writes. These provocative remarks prepare an entry into Cavell's reconfiguration of what it means to "know" another's mind — which is at the heart of his ordinary language philosophy. This is not to deny the importance of empathy, but Cavell tries to show that the use of this word is founded on the illusion, and even on an arrogance of the self, that one can and that one does wish to penetrate the mind of the other: this creates the failure to "appreciate what another, or oneself, is going through":[8] (How) can we appreciate "the reality of another's emotion"? "Why or how [do] humans matter to one another"?[9] What is "the validity of human knowledge"?[10] These are the central questions Cavell raises with regard to the concept of empathy, and they are ones that can lead us to realize the self-deception in our ideas of "knowing" the other.

The way he thematizes empathy is an entry into his idea of acknowledgment. In his view, the way empathy is used indicates that it is enlisted in a "philosophical tropism in which we come to sense the need for a passage past a standing barrier to knowledge of the other," in service of our "desire to overcome our separateness from each other,"[11] and in the all-too-human "estranged impulse to penetrate to the life of the other."[12] Philosophers fall into the "denial of reciprocity," which is a denial of the "necessary responsiveness."[13] What is wrong with these ways of thinking, Cavell writes, is not the absence of something but "the presence of something, namely the

6. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 165.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 169.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 166.
11. Ibid., 174.
12. Ibid., 167.
13. Ibid., 176.

refusal of knowledge."[14] Behind the apparently benevolent attitudes of empathy may lie an arrogance of knowing the other and a blindness to others' lives.

> The claim of suffering my go unanswered. We may feel lots of things — sympathy, *Schadenfreude*, nothing. If one says that this is a failure to acknowledge another's suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases, to *know* that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. [...] A "failure to know" might mean just an ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A "failure to acknowledge" is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank.[15]

What is obliterated is the necessity of "*my knowing and understanding my response to the other*."[16] Cavell calls this shift towards a way of knowing the *passive direction* to the other[17] — as it were, to suffer from the other — in contrast to an active orientation characterized by "our getting from ourselves over to the other."[18] In this passive kind of knowledge, "I have to ask myself how it is that I *make* myself known, or fail to, to the other."[19] In other words, the issue of knowledge of other minds is in fact that of self-knowledge. Here is Cavell's shift from empathy to acknowledgment. At the heart of his idea of acknowledgment lies *separation* as inherent in the human condition. "The fundamental problem accordingly is not to get over to the other, and work our ways in, but to learn separateness."[20] Rather than "getting across, as if spanning an immeasurable distance" from and to the other, Cavell urges us to accept the reality that "I am always already on the other side of a distance, or say separation,

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14. Ibid., 166.
15. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 243.
16. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 174.
17. Ibid., 178.
18. Ibid., 176.
19. Ibid., 178.
20. Ibid., 179.

from the other, always already responsive, or defensive against response, to that other."[21] By accepting such an abyss, distance, we convert the way we relate ourselves to the other: in his words, "the knowledge of others, as of myself, is not an act, but an adventure; if one is lucky, it is an interesting and unending one."[22]

To be ready for such an adventure, we have to learn to expose ourselves to others. Thus acknowledgment heightens the singularity of the self, which is covered over in the language of empathy. With the recognition of separation, what we can achieve is not direct, intimate contact with each other but a state of neighboring, the state of being next to each other.[23] The way of finding ourselves is not necessarily immediate, but mediated, sometimes involving the taking of a detour. In the relationship of acknowledgment, the finding of our way is mediated by language. Acknowledgment already and always contains knowledge, and "knowing is an interpretation of acknowledging."[24] Language is an ingredient of true seeing, true knowledge.

3. Attitudes Towards a Soul

The Truth of Skepticism

In the end of "Notes," Cavell says that empathy is not a "mere shrug of mystery in knowing others but a human gesture of acknowledgment before the depth of the mystery of human separateness."[25] What Cavell proposes is not any kind of agnosticism, but the reconfiguration of what we mean by the private. As he writes: "Whereas I take [Wittgenstein's] teaching on this point to be rather that what is accurate in the philosophical or metaphysical idea of privacy is not captured, or is made unrecognizable, by the idea of secrecy";[26] and that "Wittgenstein does not deny that when I am in pain it is I who give it expression, or fail to — at all events, give it

21. Ibid., 177.
22. Ibid.
23. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 105.
24. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8, quoted in Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 76.
25. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 179.
26. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 330.

expression by expressing pain, I mean by expressing that pain."[27] Acknowledgment reveals the precarious border between the inner and the outer — a sort of intangible, untouchable and invisible territory of our lives in which human beings must live but in which they struggle sometimes to find expression. As Cavell says, "I would be glad to have suggested that the correct relation between inner and outer, between the soul and its society, is the theme of the *Investigations* as a whole."[28] This is the realm of our everyday lives where the tragedy of failing to see and the facility of being able to sense the pain of others takes place. Without going through this invisible territory of the private and the inner, and without paying attention to the particularities of this subtle border between the private and the public, there could be no public, no outer: claims to be able to jump directly to social policies and to solve social problems echo in vain. Sweeping generalization should not cover over the poignant sense of this innerness, of pain and invisible suffering: conversely, paying attention to those particularities of our lives is the door through which we can open ourselves to the public. How can we then cultivate such a way of seeing? How can we learn to empathize with the pain and suffering of others while acknowledging separation and blindness as aspects of the human condition?

These are the questions that have been addressed in philosophy with regard to skepticism. Discussion of skepticism in traditional philosophy has been widely understood as the province of epistemology. Cavell tries to show that what is beneath this tendency in philosophy is the manifestation of existential disturbance. Skepticism, for Cavell, is inseparable from seeing — from being seen, and failure to see and to be seen, from the question of what constitutes seeing properly and humanely; and it identifies denial and avoidance as a deeper source of blindness. We are inclined not to accept the fact that we do not accept our failures of acknowledgement. Acknowledging this blindness, and faced with the insistent responsibility to the other, Cavell asks us to get deeper into the realm of self-knowledge such that we ourselves are radically destabilized in the presence of the other, as a precondition for shared community. In this context, what Cavell calls the "truth of skepticism" exemplifies the attempt to re-place philosophy — to question what it is for human beings *to know*, and to take the

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 329.

terms of this question beyond those of traditional epistemology.[29] Our relationship to others is not a matter of re*cognition* — not one of knowing in an epistemological sense. Skepticism for Cavell is a matter of the tragic state of one's denial of the ordinary, of one's withdrawal from the world.[30] The truth of skepticism is inseparable from a vertiginous "anxiety that our expressions might at any time signify nothing" and a "fear" of "inexpressiveness," the result of which would be that "I am not merely unknown" but "powerless to make myself known."[31] The truth, he explains, is that human condition is by its very nature disturbed and in a state of separation. We cannot fully know the other, and we cannot fully see the other. Here lies our reactive drive to grasp exhaustively, resulting ironically in failure to see.

Cavell's question then is *how*, going through this endless depth of privacy, the "I" can express my position and attitude to others: *how* can I accept and live with this fact of separateness, yet at the same time continue to sustain interest in the lives of others? Cavell's take on skepticism constitutes his warning of the human tendency to grasp everything at once — that is, comprehensively. And this stance is what lies behind his reservations about empathy. Shakespeare's Othello exemplifies this preoccupation with completeness and control, where the craving for certainty is manifested in anxiety over the possession of evidence — the voyeuristic "ocular proof" that Othello demands in the depravity of his jealousy, this perversity of possession.[32] Anxiety over the unknown and the reactionary turn to comprehensive grasping are at the heart of the metaphysical dogma of wholeness. The fundamental task for Cavell, then, is to resist capture by the temptation of metaphysical wholeness.

At the heart of Cavell's ordinary language philosophy is the fragility of language, and hence the fragility of the human condition as a linguistic being. "We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss."[33] True seeing, if there is any, should begin with this human condition. The way towards empathy necessitates the acceptance of this fact.

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29. Ibid., 241 and 448.
30. Ibid., 83-84.
31. Ibid., 351.
32. Paul Standish, "Postmodernism and the Education of the Whole Person," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 1 (1995): 130 and 132.
33. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 178.

Correct Blindness

For one to feel the pain of others, and to acknowledge the other, one has to keep standing on the precarious border between the possibility and impossibility of expression, between the inner and the outer, and between the soul and the body. You are always exposed to the risk of failing to see, failing to know, as Cavell expresses this sense in *Here and There*: "The discovery that you were wrong about another is as important, as well as painful, as the pleasant conviction that you were right."[34] If this is the case, then, it is Wittgenstein's idea of *an attitude towards a soul* that is crucial here. Cavell writes:

> "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul."[35] And, to be sure, it is the attitude of a soul. Philosophy has its characteristic ways of avoiding this knowledge, and its motives for it. So have religion and politics their characteristic ways.[36]

> My words are my expressions of my life. I respond to the words of others as their expressions, i.e., respond not merely to what their words mean but equally to their meaning of them [...]. To imagine an expression (experience the meaning of a word) is to imagine it as giving expression to a soul.[37]

Standish says that "it is in our words that the attitude to a soul is to be found. And it is in words that remorse is to be felt and expressed."[38] Our use of language, then, needs to be understood in terms "less exclusively of communication and more fully of address and reception."[39]

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34. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 175.
35. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 178.
36. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 340-41; and he says: "The idea of the allegory of words is that human expressions, the human figure, to be grasped, must be read. To know another mind is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the Investigations is that this is not a matter of 'mere knowing' [...]. The human body is the best picture of the human soul [...].The body is the field of expression of the soul. The body is of the soul; it is the soul's; a human soul has a human body" (356).
37. Ibid., 355.
38. Standish, "An Attitude towards a Soul," *The Annual Meeting of American Philosophy Forum* (February 18, 2023, online), 8.
39. Ibid.

Here the "soul of words" is anything but mystical or something emotional beyond language.[40] It is rather the nature of language *per se*. Words go beyond us. They say more than we mean. Words do not work in a systematic, algorithmic way. They are sometimes nonsense. In attempting to speak truly, we may find that our words are often bombastic, sentimental, and not quite right. Taken in the wrong way, words create misunderstanding. Words are open to new interpretation, and so they may be threatening, disturbing: this is one way in which language can be seen as always opening to new possibilities.

Towards the end of "Notes," Cavell says: "philosophy, as I care about it most, seeks to free us from self-imposed metaphysical darkness."[41] This is an echo of his remark on darkness he presented in *The Claim of Reason*:

> Wittgenstein's expression 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul' is an attempt to replace or to reinterpret these fragments of myth. It continues to express the idea that the soul is there to be seen, that my relation to the other's soul is as immediate as to an object of sight, or would be as immediate if, so to speak, the relation could be effected [...]. The block to my vision of the other is not the other's body but my incapacity or unwillingness to interpret or to judge it accurately, to draw the right connections. The suggestion is: I suffer a kind of blindness, but I avoid the issue by projecting this darkness upon the other.[42]

In place of this wrong-headed idea of darkness, Cavell talks about a "correct blindness." He elaborates on a line in the *Philosophical Investigations* in which Wittgenstein appears to face out his skeptical interlocutor: "'But if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt?' — They've been shut."[43] What can this apparent evasion, this shutting of the eyes, mean? Cavell phrases his own answer by way of a contrast between the responses of the "intellectual conscience" and of the "human conscience," favoring the latter and finding its expression of the human condition to be at risk of repression by the former:

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40. Ibid.
41. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 179.
42. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 368.
43. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §331.

> "They (my eyes) are shut" as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one's part, live in the face of doubt. — But doesn't everyone, everyday? — It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the threat of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it.[44]

It is noteworthy that Cavell here talks not about opening one's eyes fully in response to the metaphysical darkness, but about shutting one's eyes. He teaches us how *not* to see the world comprehensively.

4. Philosophy as a Way of Life

In "Notes," Cavell appreciates the contribution of Austin as "unfreez[ing] philosophy," while at the same time, he regrets that Austin "succumbs to the philosophical rigidity of treating the problem of knowing others in the way philosophy has characteristically treated knowledge, namely as a matter of achieving certainty."[45] The way he discloses the illusion about empathy has demonstrated how Cavell himself takes up the task of Austin and unfreezes philosophy further. And the way he does philosophy, the way he writes, makes us reconsider the task of philosophy. As his "Notes" shows, at the heart of Cavell's philosophy is the desire to address the question of "why or how humans matter to one another."[46] And in order to think through this issue as a living question, one has to relearn the way one does philosophy. With regard to the meaning of criticism, Cavell writes:

> If philosophy is the criticism a culture produces of itself, and proceeds essentially by criticizing past efforts at this criticism, then Wittgenstein's originality lies in having developed modes of criticism that are not moralistic, that is, that do not leave the critic imagining himself free of the faults he sees around him, and which proceed not by trying to argue a given statement false

44. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 431.
45. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 168.
46. Ibid., 169.

> or wrong, but by showing that *the person making an assertion does not really know what he means, has not really said what he wished*.[47]

The foremost task of philosophy, thus, is self-knowledge, knowing that one does not know, and reorienting knowledge in a *passive direction*.[48] We are singularized in the use of language, encountering our own selves, the way we live. We have to say, each of us, what we think, what matters to us, and test it in the eyes of others. Our words gain significance. If there is eventual unity with others, empathetic co-existence with the other, it should begin with this assiduous, endless task of self-knowledge. This places us, in practicing philosophy, as Pierre Hadot claims, in what amounts to "a way of life."[49] Cavell's work throughout his life might rightly be given this name.

47. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 175 (my italics).
48. See ibid., 443.
49. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995).

II. Empathy and the Knowledge of Others

3. The Problem of Other Minds *Here and There*: Cavell's "Notes Mostly about Empathy"

EDWARD MINAR

> Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement.
>
> LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*

1. An Incoherence in the Concept?

Stanley Cavell's 2009 essay "Notes Mostly about Empathy" represents a significant development of his investigation of other minds skepticism in Part IV of *The Claim of Reason*.[1] The essay begins with Cavell's concerns about the psychoanalyst Bennett Simon's — in Simon's own eyes, rather loose — use of the term "empathy" in interpreting the effects of tragedy on its audience in his book *Tragic Drama and the Family*. In Simon's words, "*empathy* is the English version of a nineteenth-century German term *Einfühlung* referring to the aesthetic act of 'feeling one's way into' a work of art"; and tragedy, for Simon, produces for the audience a "space [...] in which empathy can grow."[2] On his view, *King Lear* models relations between characters that call out an empathetic response from the audience. Cavell finds something akin to this relationship between characters and audience in the play; and he is certainly

1. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 164-80; Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
2. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 165, quoting Bennett Simon, *Tragic Drama and the Family* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

not rejecting the idea that we will empathize with, say, Gloucester's suffering. His reservations, however, suggest that a more fundamental aspect of our relation to others is made manifest in tragedy:

> The very attractiveness and immediacy of the idea that the audience of a great play is in a position, or space, that allows the capacity for empathy to grow somehow made me uneasy with the idea of empathy as a task of feeling into something or to someone. Lear's madness, Cordelia's helplessness, Edmund's villainy, appear rather to leap out at us, as though marking the task such matters present as one of working one's way *out of* something. Is this merely a quibble?[3]

Cavell makes something of his question. He notes that he is unsettled by "a sense of looseness or disorderliness" in the *concept* of empathy, not just in Simon's deliberately casual introduction of it. He seeks "some perspective from which to see conflicting forces as so to speak symptoms of the concept itself, that is, in our need of it."[4] Remarking that he has himself "studiously avoided appealing to the concept" of empathy, he wonders whether this is because he has the impression that the concept "pictures knowledge in a mode that precisely blocks the knowledge it claims."[5] He expresses the following, rather stark, "intuition" about the concept of empathy: "It presented itself to me as itself incoherent."[6] What is the source of Cavell's suspicion here, whence the "incoherence"? Why does feeling one's way into someone "block the knowledge it claims"? I hope in what follows to cast light on these questions by providing a kind of 'reader's guide' to this dense, allusive piece.[7] This will require us to remind ourselves of Cavell's notion of acknowledgment as well as his treatment of what he calls "empathic projection" in *The Claim of Reason*.

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3. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 165.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. If nothing else, a map of this reader's often unsure and speculative efforts to come to a provisional understanding of the essay. In Parts 2 through 4, I explore some background. In Parts 5 and 6, I try to follow Cavell's thought in "Notes Mostly about Empathy" by working through the essay selectively, but more or less consecutively.

2. Skepticism and Empathy

Here, perhaps, is a start. Cavell moves almost instantly from Simon's appeal to empathy as an explanation of the mechanisms of tragedy to a general challenge to the coherence of the concept as involved with skepticism and responses to it. His concern is with the philosophical problem of other minds and the way it forms and deforms our relations with others. Cavell's suspicions target a specific kind of philosophical deployment of the notion of empathy — call this the 'empathy picture'. Simon's "feeling one's way into" phraseology, in its vagueness and generality, invites us to picture our relations to others in a way that distorts our real need — for the recognition of our separateness from others that skepticism discovers and that tragedy puts on display. Interpreted as on this philosophical picture, the appeal to empathy exposes a site for the denial or avoidance of others, a source of "disgrace or embarrassment."[8]

While the problem may begin with local issues about how we know or are certain about particular states of others — matters which can at first blush be handled by Austinian strictures on the specialness of these particular doubts — Cavell wants to give full rein to the sense that other minds skepticism poses a deeper, more general problem: How do we "get over to the other," get so much as a conception of a mind there, in the first place?[9] Taken up as a kind of answer here — an answer meant to address the skeptic — empathy will be treated not as a specific way of relating to others but as a candidate for "our route to knowing the existence of others," for playing a special role in "establishing the validity of human knowledge" of their minds, a competitor with and close cousin to introspecting another's feelings and inferring them from analogy with my own.[10] Conceived as "feeling into something or to someone," what empathy shares with these relations is that something must close a pre-existing gap between myself and others.[11] Like them, empathy will appear to Cavell to fall prey to a kind of self-defeat, leaving otherness behind; and the picture behind the *need* for

8. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 180.
9. Ibid., 179.
10. Ibid., 180 and 166.
11. Ibid., 165.

something like empathy to close a gap will lose its grip or maybe we should say its charm.[12]

In his essay, "On Sympathy: With Other Creatures," Ian Hacking interprets the differences between sympathy and empathy in a way that aids in understanding Cavell's placement of the latter. Citing an incident from J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* in which Coetzee witnesses a familiar sheep being slaughtered, Hacking captures the gist of the boy's response as "inside, the sheep is just like me. Outside too, in the castration scene."[13] Coetzee's recounting "gets at [...] the relation between the individual human and the individual sheep. That is a relation of felt identity of body. It is a relation of sympathy (between man and beast, which works through the living bodies of the two."[14] Sympathy — sympathy-with, not sympathy-for, Hacking says — represents a fellow-feeling, a recognition of or resonance with the other as an embodied, animate being. He sees sympathy as a key to expanding the circle of moral concern. Contrast empathy. Hacking takes over a dictionary definition — "the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings."[15] While not denying its significance, he is suspicious of an overly general use of the notion as fundamental to our relations with others. For one thing, he thinks, our willingness and ability to enter into the feelings of other people is rather limited; for another, "it is too much to ask ourselves imaginatively to enter into the feelings of animals":

> I can pretend to imagine what it is like for a cur to be kicked in the chest. But I do not think I am entering into the animal's feelings, for I did not just feel

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12. On empathy, see Karsten Stueber, "Empathy," the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/empathy, especially the discussion of Theodor Lipps's phenomenological treatment of empathy "as a phenomenon of 'inner imitation'" at the end of Section 1, and of Lipps's compelling critique of the argument from analogy at the beginning of Section 2. Lipps's critique is meant to lend support to a conception of empathy as "the primary epistemic means for knowing other minds." We might say that for Cavell this gets the phenomenology wrong.
Commenting on his idea that skepticism becomes tragedy, Cavell writes: "Reading tragedy back into philosophical skepticism I would variously [...] characterize the skeptic as craving the emptiness of language, as ridding himself of the responsibilities of meaning, and as being drawn to annihilate externality or otherness, projects I occasionally summarize as seeking to escape the conditions of humanity" ("Benjamin and Wittgenstein," in *Here and There*, 122); Cavell's suspicion in "Notes Mostly about Empathy" amounts to the surmise that the empathy picture contributes to this annihilation of otherness.
13. Ian Hacking, "On Sympathy: With Other Creatures," *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie* 63, no. 4 (2001): 691. See John M. Coetzee, *Boyhood* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 97.
14. Hacking, "On Sympathy," 691.
15. Ibid., 703.

> pain, but also fear, anger, loathing of the attackers, self-loathing; I felt weak, petrified, surprised, confused, helpless, and desperately hoping they'd stop. If I were to identify with the animal so as to project these feelings into it, I should be making it up. Those are not the feelings of the animal; they are what I once felt. Humeian sympathy may arouse in me harsh memories of the time I was near kicked to death, but what is recalled by sympathetic vibration is my pain, not that of a wretched dog.[16]

For Hacking, expanding the circle of moral concern is better served by sympathy-with, in his "Humeian" sense, than by empathy in the feeling-one's-way-into sense.

While Cavell's immediate concerns are different, he shares Hacking's worry about projection. My sense of which feelings of mine to ascribe to another – and given Cavell's determination to explore the impetus behind other minds skepticism, this applies to other humans as well as to animals — depends on my recognition of others as separate from me, as having minds of their own. Only against this background —the background of acknowledgment — will feeling one's way into other minds make sense.

Clearly Cavell, like Hacking, does not deny the importance of empathy in our relations with others; he means to begin the work of placing it. On the other hand, he may seem to do little to describe its role, and he does not specify target uses of the concept in philosophy. Is Cavell simply appropriating the concept for his own, perhaps idiosyncratic purposes? This seems prejudicial. If one takes empathy as "feeling into," and one asks whether this provides the "fundamental" route to knowledge of another's feelings, will it turn out to be the case that we must either take on the feelings of others as our own, or project ours onto them?

3. Acknowledgement

Although this is not front and center in "Notes," empathy there stands in contrast to acknowledgment. Elsewhere Cavell offers this explanation of the role of acknowledgment in his response to the problem of other minds:

16. Ibid., 706.

> This idea [of acknowledgment] has been criticized on the ground, roughly, that in offering an alternative to the human goal of knowing, either it gives up the claim of philosophy to reason or else it is subject to the same doubts that knowing itself is. Perhaps this takes my idea as offering something like a mode of feeling to replace knowing [...]. But I do not propose the idea of acknowledging as an alternative to knowing but rather as an interpretation of it [...]. In an essay on the tragedy of *King Lear* I say, 'For the point of forgoing knowledge is, of course, to know' [...] as if what stands in the way of further knowledge is knowledge itself, as it stands, as it conceives of itself.[17]

Acknowledgment, a matter of responsiveness to others rather than of certainty, represents a way of capturing our real need with respect to them. That is to say, Cavell is making the case that what is in question in *knowing* others — in understanding them — is a nexus of our responses to the claims that their expressions and other manifestations of behavior make on us (and ours on them). In contrast, in the philosophical empathy picture, what we might call a particularly direct way of knowing by feeling other minds is presented. This picture accounts for our interest in others by positing a candidate way of bridging a supposed gap between self and other. Focusing too narrowly on getting over this gap, the picture has contributed to reinforcing the problem it is designed to overcome. From Cavell's point of view, too much has been conceded to the skeptic's self-conception at the outset.

There is cause to be disappointed in our and others' responses. We have no guarantees that we will read others accurately or that we will make ourselves intelligible to them. Early on in "Notes," Cavell reflects that in "Knowing and Acknowledging" he "had not been able to open far enough to view my sense that what philosophy regards as ignorance of the other and pictures as the absence of something, is rather the presence of something, namely the refusal of knowledge, or said more plainly, an avoidance or rejection of the other."[18] This judgment is initially surprising. In

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17. Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life," in *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8. Cavell quotes from "The Avoidance of Love," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 325. On acknowledgment, see also Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 238-66.
18. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 166.

"Knowing," with a nod to Heidegger, Cavell calls acknowledgment an *existentiale* — a fundamental dimension of our existence, here for describing and assessing a range of responses and interactions with others, "evidenced equally by its failure as well as its success."[19] Acknowledgment in its many variants is shown in the range of our responses to others as individual human beings. These possibilities are built into our understanding of otherness. "A 'failure to know' might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank." By contrast, "a 'failure to acknowledge' is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness."[20] Our responses to others may imagine them as stone-like, but this is to respond to them in a particular way, not to mistake them for stone.

Focusing on the prospect of an epistemic barrier between us and them, skepticism calls for a special cognitive capacity for getting over to the other — and in doing so, abstracts from our responses to the other. The empathy picture is a direct response to this call, and thus partakes of the abstraction. In taking acknowledgment as an existential category that "interprets" knowing others — provides the background for evaluating the significance of our claims — Cavell opens us to the prospect that this abstraction from responses empties the skeptic's overt concern with certainty about the mentality or humanity of others of its objects. In distancing us from mutual relatedness by focusing on cognitive penetration of each other, the shape of the skeptic's concern deprives us of those to whom we respond and who respond to us.[21]

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19. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263-64.
20. Ibid., 264. As Cavell adds, "spiritual emptiness is not a blank"; it modifies acknowledgment. See also Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 389, referring back to the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?*: skepticism and tragedy are juxtaposed to bring out "the fact that the alternative to my acknowledgment of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him."
21. This is what Cavell means in finding in skepticism the tendency to interpret (and distort) the basic fact of otherness by treating "a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack" (Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263, quoted at Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 493). To say this is not to deny that the skeptic is interpreting the right thing, the "fact" or "experience of separation from others," "the fact that behavior is expressive of mind" (Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 260 and 262). The skeptic, on Cavell's view, has the right "facts" in mind, but, understandably although fatefully, interprets them in terms of the limits of our cognitive capacities. Those who attempt to overcome skepticism by trying directly to refute the skeptic by showing that our cognitive capacities are not actually so limited more deny than distort Cavell's "fact." These anti-skeptics are "fighting the skeptic too close in" in taking over "the major condition of the skeptic's argument, viz., that the problem of knowledge about other minds is the problem of certainty" (Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 258). Such dogmatists would include those who appeal to the argument from analogy, to introspection, and to empathic projection, as well as those ordinary language philosophers who see a direct refutation of skepticism in appealing to the everyday meaning of words, Cavell's main target in "Knowing and Acknowledging" and in Part One of *The Claim of Reason*.

Why insist on avoidance as the "refusal of *knowledge*"?[22] This should not be unexpected if responsiveness to others (and again my responsiveness to their responses to me) is part of what it *is* to understand the other (and to make ourselves known). The point seems clear in the essay "Comments on Veena Das, 'Language and Body'," from 1996:

> The utterance "I am in pain" is not simply a statement of fact [...] but is (as well) an expression of the fact it states; it is at the same time an utterance whose expression by me constitutes my acknowledgment of the fact it expresses [...]. One might even say that my acknowledgment is my presentation, or handling, of pain. You are accordingly not at liberty to believe or to disbelieve what it says — that is, the one who says it — at your leisure. You are forced to respond, either to acknowledge it in return or to avoid it; the future between us is at stake.[23]

Perhaps to stretch the point: Understanding pain involves understanding not only "behavioral expressions" of pain but responses to pain, including how the person in pain experiences the responses of those others who are involved. Knowledge of pain involves understanding what responsiveness to pain *is*.

Again, there is a contrast with the parties in the skeptical dialectic. As they interpret the matter, acknowledgment would have to be preceded by a "feat of cognition" in order to pick out the relevant others.[24] That is, they seek a prior determination as to whether the other (or "other") in question is in fact human (or an otherwise suitable subject for the relevant mental states). Now, however, we have not only abstracted from the object of our quest — the human being with whom we respond — we have, it seems, bracketed the background against which it makes sense to speak of the mental states of others — the roles these attributions play in our lives.

Is it an exaggeration to say that acknowledgment is fundamental to our understanding of pain? Is it not possible for someone to understand pain, and the

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23. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 166.
23. Cavell, "Comments on Veena Das, 'Language and Body'," in *Here and There*, 182.
24. On empathic projection conceived as a "feat of cognition," see Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 424-28, and below.

language of pain, while simply being oblivious to our responses to others and the appeals to them in our expressions? Will Cavell not respond that such oblivion in the context of our lives is avoidance?[25] Perhaps it suffices to say, either in support of or in lieu of the claim about acknowledgment, that the appeal to responses and expressions puts the role of pain in our lives on display.

In *Claim*, one of the disappointments we experience with criteria — disappointments that Cavell sometimes characterizes as disappointment with human knowledge[26] — is that they do not by themselves establish our relation to the world or to others in a way that would satisfy the skeptic. Criteria give us our grasp of things, they provide us with ways of making ourselves intelligible; but for them to do this, "I have to accept them, use them."[27] But, Cavell points out, there is a "background against which our criteria do their work, even make sense"; this background is the attunement or agreement in judgment that I by and large share with others (the others with whom I share a form of life).[28] That background is not established beforehand, prior to our orienting ourselves to each other in the process of making sense. Nothing in the line of further knowledge or certainty will guarantee with whom I am in agreement. To recognize this — to see that we may not reach or may fall out of attunement — is part of what it is for others to be relevantly other to, separate from, myself. This limit to criteria is one way of capturing Cavell's "truth of skepticism." The skeptic brings out — while misinterpreting in terms of a specter of arbitrariness or cognitive lack — that my acceptance of criteria, on which my intelligibility depends, is my doing, my responsibility.[29]

In particular, we discover that

> there are not human criteria which apprise me, or which make any move toward telling me why I take it, among all the things I encounter [...] that some of them have feeling; that some of them "resemble" or "behave like" human

25. This is not an argument but a reminder, about which Cavell follows Wittgenstein in wondering who needs to be informed of this. See Cavell, "Notes," 175 and 178; and Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: WileyBlackwell, 2009), §296.
26. See, e.g., Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 476.
27. Ibid., 83.
28. Ibid. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §242.
29. See Cavell, "Benjamin and Wittgenstein," 122.

> beings or human bodies; or that some exhibit (forms of) life — unless the *fact that* human beings apply psychological concepts to certain things and not to others is such a criterion.[30]

This last clause warns us not to think that agreement in judgment will provide us with the grounding that we want, certainty about to whom we can talk and to whom we can express ourselves. Now the truth of skepticism reveals itself in another guise: responding to others and measuring our responses to them is not backed up through the provision of criteria alone; criteria are open to repudiation, and must be if we are to find our way with others. At the same time:

> To withhold, or hedge, our concepts of psychological states from a given creature, on the ground that our criteria cannot reach to the inner life of the creature, is specifically to withhold the source of my idea that living being are things that feel; it is to withhold myself, to reject my response to anything as a living being; to blank so much as my idea of anything as *having a body*.[31]

In withholding, I am in a sense already giving myself over to skepticism — to think that it is knowledge that I need leads me to deny the knowledge that I have, because I begin by treating the other (that body) as stone. I no longer have a candidate for privacy or separateness ("My feeling is: what this 'body' lacks is *privacy*"[32]). Here, Cavell concludes, "my condition is not exactly that I have to *put* the other's life there; and not exactly that I have to *leave* it there either. I (have to) *respond* to it; or refuse to respond. It calls upon me; it calls me out. I have to acknowledge it. I am as fated to that as I am to my body; it is as natural to me."[33] Where skepticism "closes [others] out" by seeking a certain guarantee that criteria apply outside our responsibility for their employment, acknowledgment, in contrast, emerges as recognizing their

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30. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 83. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §281: "Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious." The point here is as much about whom we regard as being or resembling a living human being as about giving a criterion for when the relevant mental predicates apply. What counts as a living human being and what behaves like one is not to be regarded as somehow pre-established.
31. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 83-84.
32. Ibid., 84.
33. Ibid.

separateness of others – allowing them to speak on their own, thereby allowing us to test our mutual intelligibility and its limits.[34] The depth to which acknowledgment reaches shows up in its avoidance:

> What happens to me when I withhold my acceptance of privacy — anyway, of otherness — as the home of my concepts of the human soul and find my criteria to be dead, mere words, word-shells? I said a while ago [...] that I withhold myself. What I withhold myself from is my attunement with others — with all others, not merely with the one I was to know.[35]

Unless I acknowledge others, recognizing them as *separate* sources of response, I have not just lost my access to their minds, I am also threatened with the loss of the terms in which I make sense of the world.

4. Empathic Projection

In "Notes," as we have seen, Cavell remarks his studious avoidance of the concept of empathy. This might seem disingenuous in light of the fact that, in Part Four of *Claim*, the idea of *empathic projection* plays an important role in exploring the temptations of other minds skepticism.[36] "Empathic projection" is, however, introduced in a particular dialectical context, as a stand-in label, what he dubs a "dummy concept" for a particular "feat of cognition" justifying my taking you for a human being.[37] Its dialectical role is to be distinguished from that of acknowledgment. Empathic projection, unlike acknowledgment, competes directly

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 84-85.
36. What follows is basically a very cursory survey of Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 421-29. As far as I have been able to determine, Cavell does not use the concept of empathic projection either before or after *The Claim of Reason*. In addition, I have found no explicit discussion of empathy before "Notes Mostly about Empathy." On acknowledgment and empathic projection, see the sensitive reading in Alexander Altonji, "Acknowledgment and Empathy: A Critique of Mulhall's Reading of Cavell," *European Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2024): 179-93. Altonji cites, but does not discuss, "Notes Mostly about Empathy." For Mulhall, see Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 194), 131-38. On related matters in *The Claim of Reason*, Part Four, see Richard Moran, "Cavell on Outsiders and Others," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 65, no. 256 (2011): 239-54.
37. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 440.

with (for example) analogy and introspection, on the skeptic's ground. If it locates empathy, it does so with this particular philosophical context in the forefront.

Consider Cavell's running through of a "skeptical recital" with respect to other minds.[38] In outline: Do I know that you, to whom I am talking and who are evincing no signs of excruciating pain, are currently not in fact in pain? "For all I know" you are keeping it from me.[39] In noticing this, I still seem to be assuming that you are a human being or at least something of that ilk, capable of various kinds of withholding and deception. What, however, justifies *this* assumption? How do I know that I have correctly identified you as such? "From some such fact as that my identification of you as a human being is not merely an identification *of* you but *with* you. This is more than merely *seeing* you. Call it empathetic projection."[40] Here I suppose that you are similar to me in being a candidate subject for pains and acts of deception. Then again, I worry: "I could be empathically projecting, and there be nothing (of the right kind), empathically to project with, or rather upon."[41] With the transition to that "upon" — seemingly inevitable if I have to continue the investigation in these terms — the burden has been entirely shifted onto me, to my limited resources for settling the question. If I have to meet the demand to justify my "assumption" about your humanity, then concerns about my way of knowing — some such thing as my identification with you, my empathic projection — have come to the fore. And it now seems like it is my responsibility to ask, at least, whether it really turns out to be irrational to wonder whether there are other possibilities, other things that, for all I know, you might turn out to be. In the course of the investigation, taking empathic projection to be "the ultimate basis for knowing of your existence as a human being" seems to have led us into a skeptical predicament.[42] The figure of projection has produced the sense that empathy enters the picture to close an already existing gap, and so far, "my taking you for, seeing you as, human, depends upon nothing more than my capacity for something like empathic projection, and [...] if this is true then I must settle upon the validity of my

38. Ibid., 421-22. This is what Cavell calls the "active" skeptical recital.
39. Ibid., 421.
40. Ibid., 421.
41. Ibid., 422.
42. Ibid.

projection from within my present condition, from within, so to speak, my confinement from you."[43]

Characteristically, Cavell insists that responding to the skeptic by directly challenging the (ir)rationality of the idea that there might be other things for putative humans to be from within the skeptical recital would be premature.[44] On the other hand, his tone here is tentative, the effect of just having emerged from the recital. He refrains from drawing an overtly skeptical conclusion, and immediately counters with a contending feeling: the failure of the recital at this point to convince lies in uncertainty that we have at hand a representative other, a best case for knowing, an instance of encountering others that represents our position as knowers and not merely an individual case. "The others in the room did not vanish in relevance upon my realizing that the one whom I had singled out for my attention could not be known for a human being apart from my empathic projection."[45] To put it another way, Cavell differentiates the worry about others from doubts about external objects by saying, "I find that I do not accept [the] idea of the seamlessness of projection."[46] Each individual case will be different — or at least we don't know how to tell otherwise. My doubts about *that one's* humanity single her out, even a lack of specialness is special; I stay focused on him, "thrown upon just *this* other's body."[47] With each individual's case, I start anew; "the others do not vanish when a given case fails me."[48] To take for granted that my doubts will generalize to all candidate others would be to assume that one can never know. Having worked through competing feelings about the upshot of the recital, Cavell concludes: "I do not [...] know whether to take it that I can never be certain of the existence of others on the basis of my empathic projection with them, or not so to take it."[49]

After calling attention to the singling out of an individual at the outset of the skeptical recital, Cavell turns from whether empathic projection alone allows us to

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43. Ibid., 423.
44. Ibid., 422.
45. Ibid., 423.
46. Ibid., 424. This indicates something important about the differences between the role of seeing in external world skepticism and the role of empathic projection ("more than merely seeing," ibid., 421) in the other minds case. Seeing is a capacity of mine that is directed outward toward objects in general. Empathic projection may be interpreted as having a similar generality, but cannot evade the need to account for responding to particular others.
47. Ibid., 430.
48. Ibid., 425.
49. Ibid., 423.

know of others to whether "empathic projection is, or is not, a sufficient basis for *acknowledging* the other's existence."[50] If I understand: when in this context Cavell says that "nothing could be better than this feat of cognition" — for its envisioned role of getting to the other without "step[ping] outside my confinement from the other" —, he is mulling over the idea that we don't quite know what we are asking here; in particular, we no longer are sure what the "feat" is for.[51] Acknowledgment is not in competition in with, an alternative to, empathic projection. Cavell reminds us:

> In "Knowing and Acknowledging" I said that acknowledgment "goes beyond" knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in the light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession.[52]

What is at stake in our knowledge of the other, as "interpreted" in terms of acknowledgment, then, seems not to be addressed by measuring that knowledge's credentials as a "feat of cognition," starting from within my confinement from the other, isolated from our responses to and interests in others.[53]

Cavell raises two particular, not at this point surprising, suspicions about empathic projection, "the dummy concept for *something* that must be the basis for my claim to read the other, something that I go on in myself in adopting, or calling upon, my attitude toward other human beings."[54] First, a matter of separateness: Is the other like me, do I "read in" my characteristics as the figure of projection suggests?[55] What sort of match does my feeling ("feeling my way into") envision with what I am purportedly looking for in the other? "If you wish to say that we have somehow to get *over* to the other (or inside) then this is something already true of us before a given other appears on the scene."[56] Taking this "getting over" to be

50. Ibid., 428.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., referring to Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 257: "Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge)."
53. See the passage cited in note 18.
54. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 440. See Altonji, "Acknowledgment and Empathy," 6.
55. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 440.
56. Ibid., 441.

accomplished by empathic projection threatens to assimilate the other to me, leaving out the otherness of the other: "Whereas the essence of acknowledgment is that one conceive the other from the other's point of view."[57] Second, a worry about the *need* for a special "cognitive feat": knowing others seems to have become "everything that goes into the knowing of objects *plus* something else."[58] Why, Cavell wonders, are we obligated to read knowledge of others as something like a further development or sophistication of knowledge of objects? Has this picture been imposed before the skeptical recital has done its work, or is it the product of this dialectic?[59]

5. Empathy and Its Discontents

"Notes" is an exploratory text, circling back on different articulations of Cavell's "intuition" about the coherence of the concept of empathy.[60] What does it contribute to our understanding of Cavell's responses to the problem of other minds, what does it add to Part Four of *Claim*? In "Notes," working out his dissatisfaction with the philosophical picture of empathy as fundamental to our knowledge of others, Cavell underscores the role of acknowledgment in our lives with others without relying on a prior grasp of that notion — even, without much mention of the concept — or the details of the skeptical recital. He develops his criticism of the philosophical picture as modeling our knowledge of minds on knowledge of objects, while beginning the task (not much in evidence in *Claim*) of placing empathy against the background of acknowledgment. He diagnoses the aspects of its use that might tempt us toward the empathy picture as taken up in the skeptical problematic. Finally, he places great emphasis on *conversation* as the central place in our lives where acknowledgment finds expression.

Early on Cavell revisits Austin's attempts in "Other Minds" to defuse skepticism. Austin insisted that while of course I sometimes know someone is angry, of course I

57. Ibid., 440-41.
58. Ibid., 441.
59. These related concerns are anticipated in the discussion of the "fantasy of a private language," earlier in Part Four: "In the fantasy of [the body] as veiling, it is what comes between my mind and the other's, it is the thing that separates us. The truth here is that we *are* separate, but not necessarily *separated (by* something)" (Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 369).
60. Direct expressions of suspicion about the concept occur at "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 165 ("incoherent"), 169 ("not coherently asserted"), 174, 176 ("perverse"), and 179.

don't know this by introspecting that person's feelings.[61] Cavell bemoans Austin's "failure to take the estranged impulse to penetrate to the life of the other — said otherwise, the mad impulse to *be* the other — with more sustained seriousness."[62] On the other hand, in describing how particular, everyday doubts about the mental states of others arise and seek resolution, Austin's procedures point toward what Cavell regards as a deeper aspect of skepticism. True, in some cases at least, everyday doubts are readily resolvable and seem to present "in no instance a formidable threat to our knowledge of others."[63] Where doubts about another's intentions and expressions do arise, Cavell observes, often "conversation would swiftly clarify what is happening."[64] Or not — should doubt persist, should it become unclear what is at issue or what could settle it — we come to recognize "that conversation might even be essential in becoming clear about one's feelings, hence about the importance of failing to appreciate what another, or oneself, is going through, the importance to the other or the importance to you [...] concerning why or how humans matter to one another."[65] There are no guarantees that conversation will finally settle anything. Its continuation will shape what the situation — our relation with the other in this context — becomes. For Cavell, critically, "this suggests [...] another range of questions about the reality of another's emotion, a suggestion concerning whether you are in a position to know how it is with me. What do you, with your protected life, know of despair or shame or failure or ecstasy?"[66] Here is where the problem of being known becomes more palpable than Austin seems to account for. Cavell immediately adds, "The question is evidently not about certainty but about — perhaps we might say — empathy."[67] We arrive at an important juncture in the essay that seems to call out the capacity to empathize. Behind this call lies a background of, the possibility of, conversation.

Why the implied reservation about empathy — "perhaps we might say"? It works both ways: On the one hand, Cavell begins to explore the (everyday) role of empathy and its relation to acknowledgment — casting empathy as a modification of

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61. J.L. Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 44-84. Cavell quotes Austin's "Final Note," 83-84, in "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 167.
62. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 167.
63. Ibid., 168.
64. Ibid., 168.
65. Ibid., 168-69.
66. Ibid., 169.
67. Ibid.

acknowledgment, which means, not as a way of establishing particular epistemic credentials or a feat of cognition, but as a mode of responsiveness or openness to what defines our particular relations to the other.[68] Empathy with your despair or ecstasy might lie in my recognition of your current mood and its meaning to you, as well as openness to your revisions to and elaborations of my take on your position.[69] Empathetic responses (to be distinguished from empathic projection) rely on what brings us into conversation with others — the attunements in light of which we acknowledge their ability to speak for themselves. On the other hand, Cavell wants to illuminate the sources of the "estranged impulse to penetrate to the life of the other," expressed in the impulse to use the notion of empathy anti-skeptically.[70] If the issue is to secure the epistemic credentials of our interest in others ("why or how humans matter to one another") — an impression Austin's emphasis on the removal of doubts might reinforce — empathy appears as a candidate general "feat of cognition" allowing us to "feel our way in" by establishing a connection to the other's mentality.

How is empathy expressed? Cavell registers a suspicion — an intuition? — that hints at something crucial about the role the notion plays in our lives: "I will want to say something like this about empathy, namely that it is not coherently asserted, as philosophy attempts to justify its assertion, but only to be shown."[71] The "this" here is Wittgenstein's thought that my life shows that I know that the world exists — which for Cavell calls into question the point of *claiming* that it exists, as though I have a special position for this "knowledge" or purpose for asserting it.[72] The "something like this" in the case of empathy would be that empathy is not normally and authentically manifested in an explicit claim to empathize. Yet the philosopher attracted by the empathy picture is depicted as being drawn to imagine this kind of claim as expressing a special, particularly direct or intimate, cognitive basis for my relation to others. Empathy is instead a shape that acknowledgment takes in response

68. Acknowledgment, being recognition of the other's separateness, is not a single, uniform relation to a realm or kind of thing.
69. Establishing trust (see Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 177), not certainty, is at stake; and we cannot be sure that in the working out of "what another, or oneself, is going through" it will not fall short (Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 169).
70. Ibid., 167.
71. Ibid., 169.
72. Cavell alludes to Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §7: "My life shews that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on. — I tell a friend e.g. 'Take that chair over there', 'Shut the door," etc. etc.'" My life showing this involves not only my acting on the world but my continuing to interact with my friend.

to particular individuals in particular contexts; more often than not, it will manifest itself in a silence that is an ability to listen to the other.

Thus far Cavell has focused on the empathy picture as a version of or development from the "active direction" of the problem of other minds, which focuses on the question of how I know the other, interpreted as "how I get past the other's body to the living other."[73] Now he begins to shift to "the passive or receptive direction," how I make myself known.[74] This makes sense in terms of the emergence of the role of empathy in our lives just envisioned; from my point of view, empathy amounts to a kind of responsiveness from others in the light of my (perhaps fleeting, hesitant, or confused) efforts to express myself. The passive direction presents "the issue of making or allowing myself to *be* understood, to be another — the position of *being* known — as the fundamental or essential direction of the problem of knowledge of the other."[75] How, given that my manifestations of my feelings, desires, experiences must be taken up, interpreted, do I present myself? In what sense is this kind of question, rather than the somehow more familiar, active ones about access to others on which we tend to fixate, more fundamental? Cavell points out that children undergoing and undertaking the acquisition of language communicate their desires in something that could be called "the natural language of all peoples"(Augustine), that the elders respond to the child's efforts, and that the child develops "the recognition that the sounds and motions one produces [...] are always already significant to others who are therefore of transcendent importance to [one's] life."[76] That "one is understood before one understands" indicates at least a sense in which the passive issue is "essential."[77] Without this capacity to make myself known, without my eliciting acknowledgment, there is as yet no other for me.

The traditional problem of other minds has, however, been approached, almost casually, from the active side, which "forces the realm of issues that concern how I get past the other's body to the living other."[78] Cavell keeps wondering why this privileging of the active direction, speculating that modern philosophy has in effect

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73. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 173.
74. Ibid., 173. The shift mirrors that from active to passive in *The Claim of Reason*, Part Four.
75. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 173.
76. Ibid., 173. The Heideggerian phrase "always already" recurs in a similar but distinct context on 177. On 173, the emphasis is on my recognition by others; on 177, on my responsiveness to them.
77. Ibid., 173.
78. Ibid.

materialized our knowledge of the world and has as a result been led to ask what more there is to the human being than the body, considered simply as a material object. This is no real answer, however, because this modern conception is not independent of a picture of the problem that originates with the skeptic's active query. In the light of his (and presumably our) "intellectual disappointment over philosophical solutions to the problem of knowing the mind of another" Cavell finds that "philosophy's mode of investigation (what I am calling its active or outward direction [...]) has worked to determine that it leave out, or close out, the heart of the matter."[79] The outward direction has deployed the argument from analogy and the picture of some kind of introspective access to the minds of others. In the case of analogy, we cannot get over to others without likening their states as well as their expressions to our own (and without a clear conception of our own states, at that). In the case of introspecting others' feelings, we risk not being able to make sense of their feelings being *theirs*. The skeptic will not be moved. Having started from within, trying in our various ways to model the other on ourselves, we are not even sealed out — the other's mind has not achieved independence from ours. As Cavell puts it, more simply, "Well, better the pain of skepticism than a shrug of mystery."[80] The mystery arises from the existence of the other; the shrug would be a kind of complacency in the face of treating the problem as something to be overcome by a "feat of cognition" without producing to the skeptic's satisfaction a clear conception of how this might work.

At this point, Cavell becomes more open: "Now I can perhaps indicate my interest in, and I guess my suspicion concerning, the concept of empathy, namely my sense that it remains drawn to the philosophical tropism in which we come to sense the need for a passage past a standing barrier to knowledge of the other, call this the human body."[81] He senses a standing temptation to exploit empathy in the way we had sought to use analogy or introspection. What are we to make of empathy in this role? Could it be a genuinely alternative "feat of cognition," more immediate or intuitive than inference by analogy, less anchored in the self than introspection? Recall the idea of empathy as feeling one's way into someone's feelings. If this is to be our fundamental

79. Ibid., 174.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.

source of information about what the other is feeling, how do we assure ourselves that we have access to what is behind the barrier of the body? If the empathy route literally involves feeling the feelings of the other, then we must ask (as with introspection), how we differentiate their feelings from our own, let alone find assurance of a relevant match. As a justificatory strategy for my claims that there are others around whose feelings are to be felt, this appeal hardly seems to dispel the "mystery." Perhaps, however, this is simply to assimilate empathy to introspection. Suppose, then, that we look at empathy more broadly as "the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings."[82] This seems vague enough to encompass any number of ways we interact with others. Does it provide any clue to how knowledge of the other is possible? Like analogy and introspection, empathy in its philosophical guise starts from within, with an idea of the other as already behind a "barrier"; and now this strikes Cavell as just another expression of the "desire to overcome our separateness from each other."[83] In starting from my position and trying to penetrate the other — and also in failing that, settling for myself as the model for otherness — the active skeptical path has denied to others what it takes for me to understand them. Not only their minds, but their expressions and responses, have disappeared.

Both feeling the other's feelings and the engagement of imagination with another person's situation are already particular ways of responding to the other, not ways of gaining access to otherness in the first place. My ability to engage involves my acknowledging the other's expressions as their own; we have, as Cavell puts it here, "the necessity, in understanding another, of *my knowing and understanding my response* to the other."[84] To know that another is angry is for me to recognize that mine is a response to her anger, and therefore a response to *her*. What the second part adds is that I allow that my understanding will involve how she responds to my responses, granting her this independence.

The notion of responsiveness is developed through emphasis on conversation, "the golden path to — and from — the other":[85]

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82. Hacking, "On Sympathy," 703.
83. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 174.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., 176.

> Perhaps the idea of conversation is the background against which to suggest what I meant by speaking of the concept of empathy as perverse, inherently inviting disorder. The reciprocity, the necessary responsiveness, in continuing conversation throws light on the denial of reciprocity produces by the philosopher's sense of the solution to the problem of knowing the other as requiring "introspecting the other's feeling."[86]

Why disorder, exactly? With respect to everyday contexts, Cavell is glancing back at his worry about the coherence of assertion of empathy, ways in which overt appeals to empathy may literally disrupt paths of communication. "I empathize with you" will often express a kind of withholding, and this is a way in which "conversation may [...] close or disguise its paths."[87] His main point, however, is again about the skeptical problem seen from the active direction, with its alleged "denial of reciprocity." Why this denial? To see what Cavell has in mind, let us look more carefully at the role of conversation.

Taking up, continuing, repeating, interrupting, refusing, breaking off, conversation, all these provide scenes against which our responses get meaning and our claims to knowledge get their significance. "If I mistook your embarrassment for anger, or your silence for acquiescence, either of us or both of us might have a stake in coming to an understanding of what misled me."[88] Cavell has already had it that conversation is where our understanding of others is shaped, and where the working out of our relations to others largely takes place (or fails to). Now, following the passage on reciprocity quoted above, Cavell hints that investigating knowledge of others from the active direction, by "producing the helpless attempts to determine whether what I aim to do, or need to get to, or get to first, in knowing the other, is the other's insides or outsides" not only distorts what knowledge of others means by abstracting from the articulations worked through in conversation, but also skews our conception of the objects of such knowledge — the grammar of mental states.[89] If knowledge of others is imagined as getting over to them, penetrating them and

86. Ibid.
87. Ibid., 177.
88. Ibid., 176.
89. Ibid., 177.

perhaps possessing what we find there ("*overcoming* separateness," not recognizing it), the objects of knowledge seem to take the form of discrete items reached and somehow grabbed onto. If the objects turn out to be limited to others' "outsides," then we seem to be stuck with their bodies. If, on the other hand, the objects are regarded as residing on the "insides," the idea of discreteness suggests that the items we are trying to get a hold of amount to thing-like private entities, present to the other and already fixed in their nature. Either way, responsiveness has been factored out; the only question is what sort of "feat of cognition," if any, suffices to for us to take in the relevant objects. This conception "inevitably produces and confirms a skeptical impasse, with a long history of unstable solutions or refutations."[90] Whereas on the idea of conversation as "the golden path to — and from — the other," an alternative and more realistic outlook on the objects of our knowledge and what we can know of them is available.[91] Articulating ourselves in conversation is the ongoing reciprocal process of rereading and revising the emotions and experiences that conversation uncovers. Part of what it *is* to discover such "objects" now would be that while they are indeed *there*, they are *not* fixed in their nature, knowable as "all of something, and all at once."[92] The idea that what we are after is in this sense present is a fantasy belying the role of responsiveness in our mental lives. It should at least be in question that the particular objects of our interest in the minds of others (or our own) should be modeled more or less on the objects of sight.

Up to this point, Cavell has circled back several times to the picture produced in asking "How do I know another's mind?" when this is inflected as "how do I get over to the other?," a question that seems both to abstract from the conditions on which I can ask about others and to presuppose a picture of the mental and physical as already having been pulled apart. At a high point in the essay, the alternative gains more substance; Cavell says, unguardly, that "an alternative to the hopeless demand to span an immeasurable abyss between myself and the other" — where we have been left with the active question — "would be to understand how it is that I am always already on the other side of a distance, or say separation from the other, always

90. Ibid.
91. Ibid., 176.
92. Ibid.

already responsive, or defensive against response, to the other."[93] The role of acknowledgment in conversation anticipates this response. Conversation can only be carried on if I grant the other a voice, remain attuned to their responses to my voice, and vice versa. What we get to (or fail to get to) in conversation is not a realm of already present objects but rather openings in which others are revealed, however incompletely. Here "the knowledge of others, as of myself, is not an act" — in particular not a cognitive feat of grasping a particular object by making it present — "but an adventure; if one is lucky it is an interesting and unending one."[94]

The alternative Cavell ponders, on which I am always already with, that is somehow responsive to, others, invites the worry: Have we "beg[ged] the question whether my responsiveness *is* to another's consciousness, to the innerness of what shows, its invisibility"?[95] Cavell's reaction to this kind of concern is multi-layered. His initial reaction is to speak, without much elaboration, of his position as "occupying the space of trust" — presumably, trust in another's expressiveness and mine, in our willingness to take each other on, sustaining conversation even when our attunements seem to be in jeopardy. Trust is neither a variety of nor a replacement for certainty. To put the point similarly, taking on the passive direction of the question of the other makes trust an issue going both from the other to me (how does the other make herself known?) and from me to the other (how do I make myself known?). In the first instance, my understanding of the other (or lack thereof) depends on my responses to her expressions. In the latter case, my self-knowledge is at stake. Do I recognize the other's response as a response to me? If not, I need to explore: Did the other get it right? Or is the problem in me? Self-knowledge comes through this back-and-forth. So again, in elaborating this aspect of the passive direction, is Cavell "merely assuming that there is a proper other in question, a not-me?"[96] And again, he elides the question, confessing: "I am exploring the passive direction, the making of myself known, as the fundamental case," implying that the investigation has rather changed the subject from the original question of spanning

93. Ibid., 177.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid. A similar concern arose on 175: "How can I be confident that the philosophical avoidance of the human condition, with its unsure experience of separateness, will not again find ways to cast doubt on my feeling for the feelings of others."
96. Ibid., 178.

the abyss.[97] To illustrate his sense of how the transition matters, he returns to the figure of the infant, "who must make its existence, hence what it depends upon for existence, known."[98] She accomplishes this through the expressions and manifestations of desire and aversion that are recognized by her elders. At this point the child is as yet in a stage of pre-existence; and it is here that empathy — exemplified in the responsiveness of the parent to the child — finds a natural home. Empathy at its "origin" goes in this one direction, allowing for response to the other's needs, but not yet allowing the other (that is, the child) the independence of having a voice in response to that response. Here, "there is as yet no discernible abyss."[99] What we have gleaned from focusing on the passive direction is that "the fundamental problem [...] is not to get over to the other, and work our way in, but to learn separateness."[100]

6. "The Depth of the Mystery of Human Separateness"

Cavell's "confession" of "wariness" about "the term empathy, or empathize, or empathetic" has basically turned out to be suspicion that the preemption of these terms for the philosophical purpose of bridging a gap between ourselves and others represents an intellectualization of the problem of the other.[101] Cavell, however, singles out the relevant *terms* here, neither the concept nor the philosophical picture. He takes up the case of a woman who, having been falsely imprisoned for seven years, reports, "people have been quite empathetic toward me."[102] Cavell is dismayed by the thought that we might look for the empathetic response to her in the *words*, "I empathize with you." ("Who would dare [...]?"[103]) He finds something *disgraceful* here. The *claim* to empathy may well deaden my response to the other by expressing an assimilation of her experience to mine. Asserting empathy, just like that, may be a peremptory gesture, an enactment, a feat accomplished, blocking her response, "her

97. Ibid.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid., 179.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
103. Ibid.

appreciation and acknowledgment of whatever variety of expressions of concern and gestures of solace have come her way."[104] One might better express empathy by admitting that one cannot imagine her pain, leaving open paths to a further sharing of experiences, assuming that a footing can be found. Knowing her involves letting her be, letting her allow herself to be known.

"The cause of disgrace or embarrassment [...] is a function of attempting to ascertain by divination or telepathy of the other what can only be revealed by owning one's own experience and one's responses, and failures of response."[105] While potentially fending off the task of responding to her as an individual, I close myself off by avoiding what I find about myself (the limits of my self-knowledge) in her responses to me. What Cavell hopes for is "no longer a mere shrug of mystery in knowing others but a human gesture of acknowledgment before the depth of the mystery of human separateness."[106] The shrug of mystery is the fantasy of knowing as making the other fully present to us. The disgrace lies in turning one's back on other human beings as those to whom one responds and those who responds to one. The deeper mystery lies in the day to day unfolding of what Cavell has called conversation, the sites in our lives in which acknowledgment makes its calls on one's ability and openness to "owning one's own experience and one's responses, and failures of response."[107]

104. Ibid.
105. Ibid., 180.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid. I am very grateful to Randall Havas for advice and support, as well as years of conversation on related topics.

4. From Deflection to Acknowledgment: Cavell and the Problem of Others

EDWARD WITHERSPOON

1. Introduction

The collection of Stanley Cavell's essays recently published under the title *Here and There* offers a wealth of delights. For me, the most valuable of these has been the chance to follow Cavell as he appraises his earlier writings in light of his subsequent reflections. I have found "Notes Mostly about Empathy" especially illuminating.[1] This essay revisits ideas that Cavell first broached in "Knowing and Acknowledging" and subsequently developed in the last part of *The Claim of Reason*.[2] "Notes Mostly about Empathy" contains the following assessment of an earlier effort:

> My dissatisfaction with my early essay [viz., "Knowing and Acknowledging"] was something that writing the essay itself taught me, namely that I had not been able to open far enough to view my sense that what philosophy regards as ignorance of the other, and pictures as the absence of something, is rather the presence of something, namely the refusal of knowledge, or said more plainly, an avoidance or rejection of the other.[3]

This passage invokes several themes that have preoccupied Cavell early and late: what is it that philosophy regards as ignorance of the other? What does philosophy regard as *knowledge* of the other? What is the temptation to avoid or reject the other? Why is philosophy vulnerable to it?

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1. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).
2. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
3 Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 166.

To address such questions, I will draw on all of the above-mentioned works. In them, Cavell criticizes the way the problem of other minds is framed within analytic philosophy. Because this critique is of the *framing* of the problem, it applies as much to the anti-skeptic as to the skeptic. Both sides have a distorted view of what is required to know what someone else is thinking or feeling. There are genuine obstacles to knowing others: others can dissimulate their thoughts and feelings or withhold them or lie about them. But philosophy tends to focus not on overcoming these obstacles but instead on puzzles generated by its distorted conception of what it is to know another person. Cavell focuses on the genuine obstacles, and why they matter. He investigates, in other words, why being known to each other matters. As we shall see, they matter because our personal relationships depend on mutual knowledge and mutual acknowledgment of one another's states of mind. Understanding the depth of our dependence on knowing each other allows us to explain why philosophy is constantly tempted to deny or distort that knowledge.

2. Ayer

For Cavell, the work of A.J. Ayer figures as a paradigm of analytic philosophy. It exemplifies the intellectual climate within which Cavell was trained and against which he had to react in order to philosophize in ways he found worthwhile.[4] Although Cavell does not specifically discuss Ayer's "One's Knowledge of Other Minds,"[5] this essay nonetheless provides a useful background for understanding Cavell's critique of philosophical debates concerning the problem of other minds. Ayer nicely captures what we can regard as the 'traditional problem of other minds', and mounts a classic anti-skeptical counter to it.

The problem of other minds, as Ayer presents it, arises from two necessary features of experience, to wit:

(i) "I have direct knowledge of my own experiences," and

4. See ibid., 178.
5. Alfred J. Ayer, "One's Knowledge of Other Minds," in *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1954).

(ii) "I cannot have direct knowledge of anyone else's experiences."[6]

For Ayer, my awareness of my own experiences is the paradigm of knowledge. I can't have that kind of knowledge of other people's experiences. And because I don't have direct knowledge of other's experiences, when I make a judgment about what someone else is thinking or feeling, I can easily turn out to be mistaken: the other might be lying about their thoughts or faking feelings they don't actually have. It can easily seem that knowledge of another's thoughts or experiences is impossible, or is at best only *knowledge so-called*. As Ayer sees it, the problem of other minds is the problem of explaining how we could know what another person is experiencing when we cannot have *direct* knowledge of it.

There is one historically important position in the philosophy of mind that conjures away the epistemological problem Ayer has identified. *Behaviorism* defines mental states as patterns of behavior or as dispositions to behave. For a behaviorist, observing another person's behavioral patterns or getting reliable evidence of their disposition to behave *is* directly observing or getting reliable evidence of their thoughts and experiences. Ayer rejects behaviorism, retaining the natural idea that a mental state is distinct from the behavior that is associated with it.[7] But the notion of a behavior does play a central role in the problem of other minds. For Ayer, while behavior is not identical to a mental state, observation of behavior is the only possible mode of access to other's mental states: others' behavior is "the only ground that I can have for believing that other people have experiences."[8]

The fact that my beliefs about others' minds are grounded in my observation of their behavior marks the immense difference between such beliefs and my knowledge of my own experiences. In explicating my knowledge of my own experiences, Ayer writes:

> Presumably the knowledge claimed is knowledge that something or other is the case, that I have a headache, or that I am thinking about a philosophical problem: and the point is that if the statement which expresses what I claim to

6. Ibid., 191.
7. See ibid., 193.
8. See ibid., 192.

> know refers only to my present experience, I am in the best possible position to decide its truth. If I judge it to be true, it is on the basis of an experience which conclusively verifies it, inasmuch as it is the experience which the statement describes.[9]

Ayer here characterizes "direct knowledge of an experience": it is knowledge whose justification *is the very experience which is known*. So when it comes to my knowledge of what someone else is experiencing, my having direct knowledge would be *my having the very experience which the other is having*. And so now the question is: is that possible? Can I have someone else's experience?

Ayer's answer to this is *No*. It is a matter of logic that experiences had by different people are different experiences, precisely because they belong to *different people*.

> [I]t turns out that to share [someone else's] experiences, in the sense required, is to have his experiences, and that in order to have his experiences I have to be that person, so that what is demanded of me is that I become another person while remaining myself, which is a contradiction.[10]

For Ayer the very fact that an experience is *yours* entails that *I* cannot have it. This is a logical consequence of the notions of "being the same person." Furthermore, since directly knowing that an experience is occurring is to have the experience, it also follows that, for any experience that you might be having, I cannot *directly know* that you are having it. Since I lack direct knowledge of your experiences, any claim I might enter about your experiences or other states of mind could only be justified by inferences from what I do know directly, which is, for Ayer, my own experiences. How could my experiences justify my in attributing experiences to someone else? The key, as I briefly noted above, is *behavior*. I know my own experiences, and I know how they correlate with my behavior. I can observe other people's behavior, and then compare their behavior with mine: "I know that certain features of my own behaviour

9. Ibid., 193.
10. Ibid., 196.

are associated with certain experiences, and when I observe other people behaving in similar ways I am entitled to infer, by analogy, that they are having similar experiences."[11]

One can wonder whether the analogy is strong enough to justify my claims about the other's mind. The chief issue here is whether there is any way to confirm the analogy; that is, to confirm that the correlations between *my* experiences and *my* behavior do indeed correspond to the correlations between *the other's* experiences and *their* behavior. To confirm this analogy would seem to require direct knowledge of the other's experiences: if I could *directly* know someone else's feeling on some occasion, then I could begin to confirm that what they feel when they behave that way corresponds to what I feel when I behave that way. But, of course, direct knowledge of another's experience is exactly what I do not have.

Some philosophers would argue that the inability to confirm anything about the correlation between others' behavior and their experiences fatally weakens the analogy; they therefore deny that knowledge of others' minds is possible. But Ayer is undeterred by my lack of any direct confirmation of others' experiences: it is reasonable to assume that my constitution is similar to that of other people, and so it is reasonable to assume that our behavioral similarities are indicative of mental similarities. Consequently, my observation of your behavior is a sufficient basis for (at least some of) knowledge claims about their experience.

3. Contra Ayer

In Ayer's account, the skeptic starts from a conception of the ideal way for me to gain knowledge that someone else is in a particular mental state: it would be for me to have their experience. My having their experience would give me direct knowledge, just like their direct knowledge, of what they are experiencing. Since I can't have their experience, I can't have direct knowledge of their mental states. Ayer himself accepts this argument. Where he and the skeptic part company concerns whether there is a source of *indirect* knowledge of another's mental states. Ayer, as we noted, thinks

11. Ibid., 192.

that there is, in the form of similarities of behavior between the other and me. Skeptics argue that any such similarities are an insufficient basis for knowledge. They think that the analogy can only yield knowledge if we have instances of *direct* knowledge of others' experience, that is, instances in which I have the others' experience. Ayer pushes back against this demand. Since having someone else's experience is logically impossible, such an occurrence should not be imposed as a necessary condition for knowledge.

Cavell, like Ayer, focuses on the requirement the skeptic imposes on our knowledge of others. But where Ayer wishes to explain *why I cannot have* another person's experience. Cavell poses a more fundamental question. He asks, in effect, "*What good would it do* for me to have someone else's experience? What would I learn from it?"

In investigating this question, Cavell takes issue with the claim that it is logically impossible for one person to have another's experiences.[12] Cavell argues that it is intelligible that what befalls one person directly affects another's mind. Indeed, Cavell invents a scenario with just this feature. He presents his thought experiment as a variation on the Corsican brothers, whom he dubs First and Second: Second "suffers everything which happens to his brother First"; moreover, "Second never suffers unless First does."[13] When First is whipped, both he and Second writhe in agony, even if Second is miles away. Cavell concludes that "here we have a pain in *this* body and a pain in *that* body and it is numerically the same pain, literally the same. The thing which looked unintelligible [or logically impossible], was so, only given a certain picture."[14] So if there is a sense of 'the same pain' such that it is true that I cannot have the same pain as you, this 'cannot' is a function of our natural history, of the causal linkages (or absence thereof) between you and me. The 'cannot' in question is not a function of the definition of personal identity, as Ayer would have it.

Having given the skeptic what they demanded — the possibility that two people could have literally the same experience — Cavell now pauses to ask whether

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12. I note again that Cavell is not specifically targeting Ayer in this argument. In "Notes Mostly about Empathy," Cavell has in mind any philosopher who thinks that the ideal case for my knowing another would be "having the very same experience they have," or "introspecting the other's feelings," (176) or anything of the sort.
13. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 251.
14. Ibid., 252. My interpolation.

anything has been gained. Does First, upon feeling the sting of the lash, know that Second is in pain? First feels pain, and, by hypothesis, Second feels the same pain. What does First 'directly' know? Surely *his pain*; the fact that it is *also* Second's pain is irrelevant. Now he may also know that whenever he feels pain, Second does too. But how has he come to know that? Not by feeling Second's pain (although it is true that he does feel Second's pain, since their pains are the same). First knows that Second feels pain (if he knows it), by having heard Second's testimony about his (Second's) experience, or by having observed Second expressing the very pains that he (First) was feeling. In other words, First knows that Second is in pain the way anyone else would — not through the fact of his having Second's experience. A case that was supposed to exhibit a perfect but unattainable basis for knowing others has turned out to rely on our ordinary, imperfect means of knowing them — to rely, in other words, on the very routes to knowledge the skeptic calls into doubt.

Does Second know that First is in pain? (This is the direction of fit that seems more relevant to satisfying the skeptic's wish, for the skeptic pictures direct knowledge as passively receiving another's experience.) Again, Second feels the sting of the lash, the very pain afflicting First. It is, indeed, *First's* pain: it is produced by what happens to First's body; it is alleviated by tending to First's wounds. All of Second's pains are First's. When it comes to pain, Second is not different from First. In Cavell's words:

> *his* [First's] pain no longer contrasts with *my* [Second's] pain, his has no further content so to speak; "his pain" no longer differentiates what he feels from what I feel, him from me; he is not *other* in the relevant sense.[15]

So while we could describe this situation by saying "Second knows First is in pain," we cannot say "Second knows that *someone else* is in pain." But the latter is the form of knowledge-claim that the skeptic wanted to ground on *having someone else's experience*. When we try to imagine what the skeptic claims to want, namely, direct experience of another's pain, what we actually have to picture is a fusion of

15. Ibid., 253.

consciousnesses.[16] To the extent that we can form a coherent idea of this, it is an idea that fails to be an instance of the thought "Another person is in pain."

What the skeptic presented as the ideal position for knowing what someone else is experiencing thus turns out to be useless for that purpose. This might seem to support Ayer's implicit suggestion that the skeptic is imposing an unreasonable demand on what counts as knowledge. But Ayer's understanding of the problem of other minds (and so his understanding of the range of possible solutions to it) remains structured by the skeptic's ideal. The other is in the ideal position for knowing what they are experiencing, begins the skeptic. Since I cannot be in that ideal position, my goal should be to get into a position as close to the ideal as possible. Our first attempt to do so was to imagine that I could have the other's experience. That attempt has been shown to be useless. But from it Ayer retains the idea that knowing another requires that I have something in common with them. On his view, the common something has to be our behavior. The more alike our behavior, the stronger the analogy that grounds my judgments about the other's experiences.

Because the anti-skeptic's account of our knowledge of others rests on our having something in common with them, it is subject to a criticism similar to Cavell's critique of the skeptic's wish for experiences in common. (The remainder of this section is inspired by Cavell's writings but is not meant as an exposition of them.)

You have banged your thumb with a hammer: for the Ayer-style anti-skeptic, if I am concerned to know what you are feeling, the epistemically scrupulous thing to do would be to hammer my own thumb. I would then be able to notice my behavior, and check that indeed it is similar to yours (the same hopping about, the same cursing, the same grabbing of the swelling thumb with the good hand, etc.); then I would be as justified as possible in asserting "I know you are in pain."

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16. John L. Austin had earlier registered the absurdity of the idea that having another's pain is a route to knowing that they are in pain. To the objection that you ought not to say you know Tom is angry, because you don't introspect his feelings, Austin replied: "One: *Of course* I *don't* introspect Tom's feelings (we should be in a pretty predicament if I did). Two: *Of course* I *do* sometimes know Tom is angry. Hence Three: to suppose that the question 'how do I know that Tom is angry?' is meant to mean 'How do I introspect Tom's feelings?'... is simply barking our way up the wrong gum tree." Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 115-16. Cavell agrees with Austin's argument, but he seeks an understanding of what has elicited this confusion that goes beyond Austin's flippant '*of course*." See Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 167-68.

This method of determining another's inner state is patently ridiculous.[17] And one may object that this is an unfair portrayal of Ayer's position: we should understand him not as explaining how we *find out* that someone else is in pain, but rather as giving an account of how we *justify* claims about others' experiences. The occasion for my judgment that you are in pain is simply my seeing your cursing, hopping, thumb-cradling behavior. We learn to make such judgments in learning to talk, and for that no self-inflicted hammer wounds are necessary. The search for similarities of behavior belongs to the reflective mode of justification: to *justify* my attribution of pain, I retrospectively look for similar behavior I have exhibited; my findings are what I marshal to ground the judgments that I arrive at reflexively.

This defense of the search for similarities of behavior as the ground of knowledge claims about others' minds does not address the fundamental problems with the absurd picture of what it is to know what someone else is experiencing. The context of discovering that someone else is in pain cannot be hermetically sealed off from the context of justifying the judgment that they are. An account of how one justifies a judgment carries implications for what you must do in arriving at it, since making a judgment is always oriented towards making a *justified* judgment and so is oriented towards acquiring whatever our account of justification tells us we need. Consequently, according to an Ayer-style anti-skeptic, I cannot simply judge that another is in pain on the basis of what they are expressing; I must always keep one eye on myself, to check that I have behaved similarly in the past. For if I don't have the relevant past behavior, then I am rationally compelled either (a) to refrain from judging, or (b) to seek to generate the missing thing in myself.

Both of these disjuncts are unattractive responses to others who present novel expressions of their states of mind. Option (b) amounts to the recommendation to hammer my own thumb in order to attribute pain to you. But taking option (a) would leave me cut off from a vast range of human experience. If there is anything idiosyncratic about the other's expression of pain, taking option (b) would bar me from making a judgment about them. Indeed, even if the other's behavior is typical,

17. At one point Ayer comes close to suggesting that we proceed in the absurd way I have just imagined: "I infer that my friend is in pain, because of the condition of his tooth, because of his nervous system, because of his wincing, and so forth; and the connection of these properties with a feeling of pain is one that I can, in principle, test, one that I may in fact have tested in my own experience." Ayer, "One's Knowledge of Other Minds," 213.

but is of a type different from any I have exhibited, then I can make no well-founded judgment about them. Seeing a man wailing and tearing at his clothes and pouring dust on his head as he bends over the body of his dead child may naturally affect me to judge that he is in extreme emotional pain, but I am not entitled to make that judgment unless I have acted in similar ways myself in the past. Contrary to the proponents of the argument from analogy, it is often in such cases of extremity that we feel most certain of what the other is experiencing. Do you have to have gone through childbirth to recognize that a woman in labor is suffering? Do you have to have broken a limb to recognize the agony of someone who has just fallen from a ladder and whose leg lies twisted under them? (If you are a reader who feels that these rhetorical questions are question-begging, I ask you to bear with this essay a little longer. Your objections will get a hearing.)

Even in cases in which the anti-skeptical position licenses judgments about others' experiences, they do so in phenomenologically implausible ways. For the anti-skeptic, a judgment about another's experience is always equally a judgment about my own. So to know another I have to direct my attention in two directions, towards them and towards myself, so that I can ascertain how much *like me* the other is. On this view, carefully attending to the other — finding out what makes *them* tick, how *they* manifest their thoughts and feelings and attitudes — yields knowledge of them *only if* what I discover corresponds to what I have noticed in myself. Ayer-style anti-skepticism makes it impossible for me to expand my understanding of others through focusing exclusively on *them*.

Ayer purports to be an anti-skeptic. And it is true that, as against skepticism, he carves out a limited range of cases in which we *can* be said to know what someone else is feeling. But in all cases in which I don't exhibit the same behavior as the other person — that is, in the vast majority of my encounters with others — his view entails that I cannot know and should not make judgments about their experiences. And even in the cases in which his view would grant that I have knowledge, its account of *how* I come to know puts the focus on me as much as on the other, and so occludes the fact that we can learn about others by attending to *them*.

4. Empathy

This criticism of anti-skepticism requires a qualification. My perception of the other often *does* involve a certain kind of reference to myself, and there is a sense of 'having the same experience' as someone else that is relevant to knowing their mind. This is the sense of sharing an experience that contributes to mutual understanding. I depend on other's having had life experiences similar to mine when I try to communicate what is going on with me. Someone who has never felt sexual desire might not be able to understand what a lover feels for their beloved. Someone who has never lost a close relative might be limited in their understanding of my grief at the death of my sibling. To know what intense grief, remorse, joy, boredom *are* may well require having known them, that is, having experienced them and gaining words or other means of expressing them.

Cavell gives voice to a perceived failure of understanding: "What do you, with your protected life, know of despair or shame or failure or ecstasy?"[18] This is an outburst. But Cavell puts it in the form of a question. And it is not obvious that the answer to the question should be, "Nothing." What it would take for someone who has lived a protected life to know something of despair or shame or failure or ecstasy is left open. But Cavell gives what is needed a label in the sentence that follows the outburst: "The question is evidently not about certainty but about — perhaps we might say — empathy."[19] I would characterize empathy as the ability to feel your way into another's state of mind. It is what enables us to know what it is to be in that state of mind, and so enables us to grasp the content of the judgment that someone is in that state. The role of this kind of understanding is not to provide the *justification* for the judgment; it is not the route to gaining *certainty*. So while we must grant that it is essential to knowing another's state of mind that I have empathy enough to know what they are experiencing, we can retain the conclusion of the preceding section that my judgment is not based on my sharing patterns of behavior with them.

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18. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 169.
19. Ibid.

5. Deflection

As we have seen, what the skeptic advances as the ideal of knowing another's mind – namely, having their experiences – is in fact irrelevant to such knowledge. Yet the question of whether one person can have another's experiences has been a topic of intense philosophical controversy. On one side Ayer and the skeptics he engages with insist that the answer is no, as a matter of logic. Opposing them is Norman Malcolm, who insists that the answer is yes, as a matter of the grammar of our language.[20] According to Malcolm, the rules for the use of our language entail that two people *can* have the same pain and that it is nonsensical to say that they *cannot*. When Ayer or a skeptic tries to assert the contrary, then they are either being perverse or are ignorant of the rules for the use of expressions like "the same pain."

Cavell is not satisfied with any philosophical criticism that describes its target as ignorant or perverse. (This is why he has reservations about J.L. Austin's treatment of philosophers who — in Austin's view — misuse language.) When it comes to skepticism in particular, Cavell finds that the skeptic has deeper, more compelling motivations than anti-skeptics in the mode of Malcolm and Austin: the skeptic perceives profound truths about human life:

> The skeptic comes up with his scary conclusion — that we can't know what another person is feeling because we can't have the same feeling, feel his pain, feel it the way he feels it — and we are shocked; we must refute him, he would make it impossible ever to be attended to in the right way. But he doesn't *begin* with a shock. He begins with a full appreciation of the decisively significant facts that I may be suffering when no one else is, and that no one (else) may know (or care?); and that others may be suffering and I not know, which is equally appalling.[21]

The skeptic moves from decisively significant facts to the conclusion that we cannot ever know what another person is thinking or feeling. To undermine that scary

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20. Norman Malcolm, "The Privacy of Experience," in *Epistemology: New Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Avrum Stroll (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).
21. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 246-47.

conclusion, Malcolm asserts that two people *can* have the same experience. Ayer asserts that while two people *cannot* have the same feeling, nevertheless they can acquire justified beliefs about each another's experiences. Malcolm, Ayer, and the skeptic thus become embroiled in a complicated three-way debate that hinges on the having of the same experiences.

In the continuation of the above passage, Cavell describes this situation:

> But then something happens, and instead of pursuing the significance of these facts, he [the skeptic] is enmeshed — so it may seem — in questions of whether we can have the same suffering, one another's suffering.[22]

By showing that my having your experience is not relevant to my knowing what you are experiencing, Cavell allows us to appreciate how far Ayer, Malcolm, and their skeptical interlocutor have departed from the skeptic's original insight. Cavell offers a term for this phenomenon, wherein the "full appreciation of decisively significant facts" gives way to an irrelevant dispute: he suggests that "the issue has become deflected."[23]

To be deflected in this context is to turn away from a difficult truth towards a philosophical puzzle.[24] Philosophers know how to deal with puzzles: they have graduate school training in making distinctions (qualitative versus numerical identity), constructing analogies (the other's behavior is like mine), imagining outlandish possibilities (telepathy). They don't have academic training in confronting the fact that others whom I need or wish to know can remain enigmas. So philosophers are vulnerable to subtly shifting the topic, in this case, from the stubborn *otherness* of others to having the same experience (a possibility that — at first blush — promises to connect me with others). In the face of this challenging feature of the human condition, engaging in a philosophical dispute serves as an escape, a shift to a topic well suited to philosophical analysis.

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22. Ibid., 247.
23. Ibid.
24. Cora Diamond calls attention to this moment in Cavell's response to skepticism. She puts the concept of deflection at the center of her account of how philosophy evades what she calls "difficulties of reality." Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in Cavell, Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 56. My discussion is deeply indebted to hers.

Ayer provides a textbook instance of just such a deflection:

> It may in fact be the case that other people baffle or deceive me. I have some evidence to show what they are really like, but it is not sufficient for me. Even though they tell me, with every appearance of honesty, what is going on in their minds, I may still doubt whether they are telling me the truth. How can I ever be sure, in such a case, that I am not mistaken? A question of this sort frequently expresses a felt anxiety.
>
> But how is this anxiety to be allayed? If someone finds himself in this position, what can be required to reassure him? Perhaps only that he should get to know other people better, and this he may achieve; it is at all events a practical problem. Perhaps he needs something out of the ordinary, like telepathy, which he may not in fact be able to achieve.[25]

And now Ayer enters into questions and puzzles about the possibility of telepathy.
[indent] We start with a fact, a real problem:
We start with a fact, a real problem: other people can baffle me. Ayer notes that there may be ways to address this problem. But rather than discuss what these ways may be, he invites us to imagine a condition that promises to make the problem disappear — telepathy! And the definition and possibility of telepathy (of *directly knowing* the experiences of others) are problems that philosophy can go to town on.

Cavell wants to avoid getting deflected from the facts that Ayer notes and that skeptics emphasize. Skeptics and anti-skeptics fail to pursue the significance of these facts, Cavell says. What would it be to avoid deflection, to pursue the significance of these facts?

For a start, we could enumerate the facts themselves. They include these: there is often a gap between what someone *is* and how they *appear*. We are capable of lying. We can dissimulate our feelings. We can hide our thoughts. And, on the other side, we can be obtuse; we can fail to perceive what is going on with the person right in front of us. These features — our powers of deception, our power to suppress our feelings and withhold our thoughts, on the one hand, and our distractedness, our

25. See Ayer, "One's Knowledge of Other Minds," 195.

obtuseness, on the other — often mean that we do *not* know what is going on with others. I might be suffering, and no one else know (or care); and the person before me might be suffering and I not know (or care). On the other hand, as Ayer notes, there is such a thing as getting to know other people better. Often, this is a simple matter of paying attention to them. Sometimes it is a matter of gaining experience (becoming more worldly, as we say), or getting better acquainted with the people we are trying to read.

These observations about how we get to know someone else's mind — and the facts of human obtuseness and deception that often stand in the way of such knowledge — are so banal as to appear to be almost without significance. (Ayer can mention them and drop them in a sentence or two.) But Cavell says that these facts *are* significant. Why? Well, one part of the answer is that they provide the animus of the skeptic's worry that I might *never* know what is going on in another's mind. Cavell is more interested in a different aspect of the significance of these facts: they can be *appalling*. Now, what's appalling about the fact that I sometimes don't know what someone else is feeling or the fact that my own feelings might go unnoticed and unknown by others? When I am suffering, and others do not know, it's pretty clear why I would be appalled: I am not getting the attention and care I need. My distress arises not just from a lack of care for my injury. It also comes from the added insult that I feel from others' lack of awareness. I thought they cared, but they can't be bothered to pay attention to me; or I had counted on them to be sensitive, and I realize I have misjudged them. There are countless gradations of disappointment (with myself or others) that are possible when my suffering goes unnoticed, and many of them are indeed appalling. (There will be other cases in which I seek to conceal my suffering; then it might be other people's *discovering* my suffering that would appall me. Philosophy has scarcely scratched the surface of the range of possible reactions elicited by unknown suffering.)

But why should *I* be appalled when I am ignorant of someone else's suffering? Well, sometimes ignorance is a failure — it is my not knowing something that I *should*. And when I fail to recognize suffering that I should, the failure is not just a cognitive deficiency: it leads me to fail in my obligations to the other.

> Your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer — I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what "(your or his) being in pain" means. Is.[26]

The suffering of another person makes a claim upon me. When I encounter a suffering person but fail to recognize their suffering, I am failing in my obligations to them. And that is a cause for self-reproach and for being appalled at my lack of awareness.

The risk — or I should say the fact — of our failures to know others helps explain the attractions of the skeptic's ideal of knowledge. Let us consider actual disappointments in our quest for knowledge of those around us, instances in which we have misunderstood others, failed to perceive their sufferings or failed to register their interests or aspirations. These disappointments are often due to our own obtuseness, carelessness, lack of engagement, and other forms of ineptitude. Now, prompted by such failures and possible failures, the skeptic offers a picture of what it would be to know, *really* know, another person's mind. The skeptic's picture has disappointment built into it; it requires would-be knowers to achieve something they cannot achieve. This may be discouraging. But at the same time, focusing on this allegedly necessary disappointing of our urge to know masks or excuses our *actual* failures. ("I did not realize that my colleague was upset at the way we were discussing job candidates" can become "I cannot really know whether my colleague was upset").

6. Acknowledgement

Cavell says that another's suffering calls for acknowledgment. For me to acknowledge another person's suffering is to let them know that I know that they are in pain. Putting my knowledge into the public space (the shared cognitive realm between me and the other) constitutes what I go on to do as a *response* to their suffering (or as a failure to respond). (If I am simply ignorant of the other's suffering, then what I do is not a response to it — even if what I do happens to alleviate it.)

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26. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263.

Acknowledgment is a rich and complicated phenomenon. Cavell has done more than any thinker I am aware of to chart its contours.[27] I will draw on his work to describe the important role that acknowledgment plays in our lives together. Cavell enables us to see that the traditional skeptical problem space is incompatible with recognizing that role. Registering this fact will illuminate the poverty of the traditional skeptical debate, and will give us a reason to interpret it as a deflection from the demands of social life.

Cavell, as we have seen, introduces the concept of acknowledgment to describe the first, necessary step towards responding to the other's suffering. Suffering makes an especially urgent call for acknowledgment, but such calls are ubiquitous. We can get a sense of the pervasiveness of acknowledgment, as well as its structure, by considering a homely example from Cavell.

When I am late, say, late to the class I am supposed to teach, I have several courses of action open to me. I know I'm late (I looked at my watch as I hustled across the quad), but I can brazen it out — just waltz in and proceed as though there is nothing wrong. Alternatively, I can say, "I know I'm late. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting" and then (perhaps) add an explanation or excuse. These different responses to the fact of my lateness convey different attitudes and will create different relationships with my students. If I ignore my tardiness, that is, if I fail to acknowledge it, that may convey that I am oblivious — perhaps I wish to cultivate a reputation as an absent-minded philosopher with my mind on higher matters — or it may convey that I have little regard for my students' time. On the other hand, acknowledging my lateness conveys that I regard my students and me as living within a common practical framework in which timeliness matters. My acknowledgment does not determine any particular further actions; it doesn't guarantee that I will be on time for the next meeting, for example. But it does create a shared cognitive space in which my actions (past and future) can be discussed: was this a one-off delay, or do I need to change my routine, or does my internal clock just not conduce to this meeting time? Whether such questions come up on this occasion or not, the fact that

27. A sign of its importance in his work is the fact that the last, long, chapter of *The Claim of Reason* is entitled "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance" (329-496). This title alludes to the standing temptation to avoid the claims that my knowledge of others imposes on me. This temptation motivates the tendency of philosophers to be deflected from difficult human truths towards philosophical puzzles.

I have acknowledged my lateness makes them possible, whereas brazening out my lateness means I will not even entertain such questions.

From this example we can sketch some structural features of acknowledgment. Acknowledgment concerns facts relevant to myself and (some) others, e.g., the fact that I am late, the fact that you are in pain. My acknowledgment of that fact is typically expressed simply by stating it — sometimes with an emphatic "I know."[28] My statement does not just assert a proposition; it does not just communicate a fact. It also communicates that *I* know it: by stating the fact I avow the knowledge as *mine*. I thereby explicitly take on the responsibilities that possessing that knowledge entails. Similarly, when I acknowledge doing something, I put myself on record as being the agent of that act — I avow it as mine — and I thereby accept the responsibilities that performing that action entails. We should note that the mere fact that I acknowledge knowing something or doing something does not by itself determine what these entailed responsibilities are; rather, negotiating these responsibilities becomes possible in the shared cognitive space that my acknowledgment opens. And accepting these responsibilities does not entail that I will fulfill them. But the explicit acceptance puts me in a different moral situation from someone who does *not* acknowledge what they know or what they did. And the moral situations of those who acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge what they know and do differs also from the situation of someone who is ignorant of the relevant facts or deeds.

Let's bring this back to the problem of other minds. When I acknowledge your state of mind, I am publicly committing myself to treating you as someone in that state. My knowing that you are suffering a headache already obliges me to show appropriate consideration (e.g., bringing you a painkiller, keeping my voice down, dimming the lights, etc.); my acknowledging that you have a headache makes that commitment public to you and anyone else to whom I acknowledge it. I might fail to fulfill that commitment (I might absent-mindedly slam the door and flip on the lights) but my acknowledgment makes special forms of criticism possible: others can recognize that I am being inconsiderate or blamably forgetful, not just obtuse or ignorant.

Mutual acknowledgment belongs to the warp and weft of our lives together. With the expression 'our lives together' I mean to refer to the web of interpersonal

28. See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 255.

relationships that each of us stands in to a world of others. These are constituted by what P.F. Strawson calls the "personal reactive attitudes": attitudes like "gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings."[29] Acknowledgment is an essential ingredient in expressing these attitudes. For example, in expressing gratitude to my benefactor, I acknowledge the good deed they have done me. In expressing resentment, I acknowledge that I have been harmed by the person I resent. "To ask to be forgiven is in part to acknowledge that the attitude displayed in our actions was such as might properly be resented."[30] Expressing, evaluating, and acting on these attitudes — which requires acknowledging them and all that they entail — is (part of) what it is to participate in our lives together.

7. Acknowledgement and Knowledge

Anyone moved by skeptical worries is likely to feel that, with all this talk about acknowledgment as expressing a speaker's knowledge of facts — including facts about other minds — we have simply begged the question of skepticism. The skeptic will remind us of a point that Cavell himself emphasizes: acknowledgement is predicated on knowledge.

> It isn't as if being in a position to acknowledge something is *weaker* than being in a position to know it. On the contrary: from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I'm late (which is what my words say); but from my knowing I am late, it does not follow that I acknowledge I'm late — otherwise, human relationships would be altogether other than they are. One could say: Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge).[31]

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29. Peter F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 4.
30. Ibid., 6.
31. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 256-57.

I cannot acknowledge that I am late to class if I don't know that I am. Similarly, I cannot acknowledge your suffering if I don't know that you are suffering. But you might be dissimulating or lying, or I might be misreading your behavior or misinterpreting your words. The skeptic, in reminding us of these possibilities, demands that I rule them out. Cavell insists on the facts of human opacity, and so it can appear that he has done nothing to rule out these skeptical possibilities. And if the skeptical possibilities are live, he is not entitled to help himself to the concept of acknowledgment.

Someone might try to accommodate the importance of acknowledgment while maintaining the epistemological standards that make skepticism seem rationally compelling. This accommodation would start with Cavell's insight that acknowledging your suffering involves a practical response: it is doing something to answer the call that your suffering makes on me, the call whose content is typically to provide aid and comfort. And I can deliver aid and comfort without any particular *epistemic* stance as regards what you are actually feeling. Thus we can try to bring skepticism into harmony with the practical demands of acknowledgment:

> When you appear to be suffering, the essential thing is that I respond to that appearance. I don't have to *know* that you are suffering. Even though (as the skeptic reminds us) I cannot know that you have the thoughts and feelings that you appear to have, I can ascribe them to you based on the observable cues that we normally use for such ascriptions. The claim that your putative suffering makes on me is to treat you *as though* you have the thoughts and feelings that you appear to have. When you wince and clutch your temples, I am to say "Oh, you have a headache," and I am to dim the lights and fetch you a painkiller. We can call this attitude "knowledge for all practical purposes," as opposed to the genuine knowledge that is out of reach. And this is enough for us to sustain our lives together.[32]

Let's consider this from the point of view of someone who stands in need of sympathy. Imagine that you have just had your heart broken. You confide your

32. Some interpreters of Cavell seem to think of acknowledgment in just this way: as a practical stance toward others that is a *substitute* for knowledge. My argument in this section is meant to show why this reading is not sustainable.

emotional pain to your philosopher-friend. Your philosopher-friend wants to be responsive while remaining rationally scrupulous. So after you share how hurt you are by the break-up of your relationship, your friend replies:

> You are giving every appearance of being someone with a broken heart, and I will treat you as such. Strictly speaking I cannot confirm that you are really in emotional pain, but I will behave towards you as though you are. So let me give you a hug, and, here, take this tissue to wipe your eyes.

This would be a poor attempt at consolation. When you are heart-broken, you need your friend to *recognize* that you are. It is not enough — indeed, it can be quite infuriating – for your friend to treat you *as though you are upset*. You need your friend to acknowledge that you *are* upset. The friend's attitude — "You say you are upset, but I don't really know that you are" — denies you what you seek. The friend's response is inadequate not just because the friend *expresses* their lack of knowledge. Your dissatisfaction with your friend would not be diminished — in fact, it could be exacerbated — if they kept their uncertainty quiet. Imagine that you discover later that your friend doubted your experience, that they harbored the thought that maybe you weren't really upset at the break-up of your relationship: you would quite rightly feel betrayed or duped.

Why does it matter that others *know* what I am experiencing? Whether someone actually knows that I am suffering a headache or merely treats me as though I am might not make a difference to the outward aspects of the care I receive: either way, they could fetch a painkiller and dim the lights. But we care not just about what people around us *do*, but also about their attitudes towards and judgments about us. We typically care about being seen for what we are. We seek to be known. (Not known by everyone, and not every thought or feeling, of course. But we regard as pathological persons who wish to keep their thoughts and feelings concealed from everyone, even their intimates. In saying that people who do not wish to reveal themselves to others are exhibiting a 'pathology', am I just expressing a prejudice? The subsequent argument will provide a basis for answering, No.)

8. Conversation

A purely practical response to suffering (providing a tissue or an analgesic) may not on its own amount to an acknowledgment of that suffering; the acknowledgment requires also the expression of knowledge, and knowledge is typically expressed through *saying something*. Conversation is important in at least two respects: first, it is often the means by which we discover what someone else is thinking or experiencing, and it is typically the vehicle through which we express that knowledge and thereby acknowledge the other's state of mind. By unpacking some of Cavell's thoughts about the significance of conversation we will discover another way that philosophy is prone to misrepresent our lives together.

J.L. Austin, in describing *genuine* doubts (as opposed to the merely "metaphysical" doubts that — in his view — skeptics offer), says, "When to all appearances angry, might he [a person I seek to understand] be feeling no emotion at all?"[33] To this and similar descriptions, Cavell responds as follows:

> Austin's drummed-in phrase "When to all appearances angry" suggests that one or another blatant displays of this common and blatant state may be feigned or otherwise misunderstood by us or express some other way of being stricken (say in suddenly remembering an appointment you are pained to have forgotten). Now such cases are most obviously ones in which conversation would swiftly clarify what is happening, but I recall no instance in these texts of a suggestion that conversation might even be essential in becoming clear about one's feelings, hence none about the importance of failing to appreciate what another, or oneself, is going through, the importance to the other or the importance to you, no suggestion, you might say, concerning why or how humans matter to one another.[34]

The first point to glean from this remark is the observation that conversation provides the chief way we learn about others' minds. This may sound so obvious as to hardly be worth mentioning. But philosophy's portrayal of what happens in

33. Austin, "Other Minds," 112.
34. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 168-69.

conversation should give us pause. Both skeptics and anti-skeptics portray us as detached observers, collecting behavioral evidence (bodily movements, mostly, but maybe also the emission of sounds), from which we infer — justifiably (anti-skeptic) or not (skeptic) — the mental states of the being under observation. The reality is that when we seek to understand someone else, we are normally an engaged participant with them: we are trying to communicate or to cooperate with them, or we are competing or fighting against them. It matters to us to read others' minds correctly, and through sustained interactions with them we can generally obtain good grounds for judging that we have done so — where these grounds are what they say and do, *not* an interpretatively neutral base of behavior and emitted sounds. We can on occasion take the distanced attitude of a mere observer who is trying to figure out someone else.[35] But adopting the distanced attitude takes special training and effort, and the ability to adopt it and to interpret others from it is parasitic on our normal attitude of engagement. That is, it is a suspension of the personal reactive attitudes that are our default approach to others.

Conversation has another aspect that Cavell identifies in the above passage. When I converse with another, I am not only discovering their mind, I am also revealing my own. Moreover, self-revelation is also self-discovery. Frequently I learn what I think through finding out what I say; I clarify my feelings through choosing how to express them. The work of communicating with others — of establishing a shared understanding — forms our minds; conversation is not just a matter of conveying to each other what is already formed.

Conversation is thus a two-way activity of revelation and discovery. But it has another crucial dimension: my discovery of my own mind is shaped by the other's acknowledgment (or lack thereof). I depend on my interlocutor not just to *receive* my expression of my mind, but to confirm or disconfirm it — to connect with *me* through what I have said. This does not mean that I let the other tell me what I think. But when I trust my interlocutor, I take seriously their take on things — including me — and adjust my understanding in light of theirs, sometimes by agreeing with them, sometimes by articulating my disagreement. This is why finding a suitable interlocutor is so important, and so difficult.

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35. We can, in other words, adopt what Strawson calls the "objective attitude" towards another person.

If this account of conversation is correct, it provides at least part of an answer to the question of why it matters that others know what I am experiencing: it is because I depend on their knowledge to become who I am.

9. Exposure

We have been discussing conversation as the most natural — and most overlooked — answer to the questions, "How do you know another's state of mind? How and why do you reveal your own?" Those questions are urgent because they inform our relationships with one another. Our interpersonal relationships are predicated on our acknowledging pertinent facts about each other (that we are fellow citizens, that you are in pain, that I am late again, etc.). And acknowledgment is predicated on knowledge, including especially knowledge of others' thoughts and feelings. Our discussion has sketched a set of facts about how our lives together depend on knowing each other.

But there is another set of facts, the ones of primary importance to the skeptic: we are opaque to one another, we can conceal our true thoughts, we can fail to communicate what we want others to know. A moment's reflection on conversation should bring these facts to the fore: conversation is the medium not only for revealing one's state of mind, but also for concealing it. The conversation I thought so indicative of your mind — and so helpful in clarifying my own — might turn out to have been a con job. Because of the depth of possible deception, not to mention obtuseness and indifference and other obstacles to knowing, one might feel that we should cultivate the distanced attitude of the skeptic; only so can we protect ourselves from being duped and from suffering all the harm attendant on that. We may (from politeness or necessity) normally treat other people *as if* they are thinking and experiencing what they say they are. But to be rationally scrupulous, we should make no judgments as to what they are *actually* thinking or feeling.

Cavell remains always aware of the skeptic's facts. In "Notes Mostly about Empathy," he registers the possibility of duplicitous interlocutors:

> If conversation is the golden path to — and from — the other, the only process that seems to allow of an idea of order in this realm naturally subject to

> hurried imprecise or simplified description, conversation may also, briefly or permanently, close or disguise its paths.[36]

Despite this possibility, Cavell describes himself as "always already on the other side of a distance, or say separation, from the other, always already responsive, or defensive against response, to that other."[37] He envisions the objection we are considering: doesn't his stance, in its commitment to the interlocutor's having a mind that is apt for being known, beg the question? Cavell responds by redescribing his position as "my occupying the space of trust."[38]

In adopting this attitude, is Cavell simply ignoring the fact that he might be fundamentally mistaken about the other, the fact that the person he trusts might betray him? The skeptic has argued that there is no good basis for judgments about others' minds, and we have seen that anti-skeptics give us inadequate and inappropriate bases for such judgments. Cavell offers no refutation of skepticism. So doesn't our discussion of the centrality of acknowledgment and of conversation rest on an unjustified assumption, to the effect that we *can* know others' states of mind. And isn't that an irrational stance?

Skeptics and anti-skeptics seek a secure basis for answers to the question, "How do I know that the other is a minded human being, and how do I know their particular state of mind?" They want a basis that cannot be overthrown, a basis that works around the fact of opacity to get to something indubitable; they seek an ocular proof, a mark or feature that guarantees the truth of claims about others' minds. This is a wish to inhabit a protective shell, a position that is cognitively secure and that is protected from practical danger by not relying on trust.

In contrast to this wish for — or fantasy of — security, Cavell highlights how claiming to know others leaves us *exposed*.[39] "The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude."[40]

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36. Cavell, "Notes Mostly about Empathy," 176.
37. Ibid., 177.
38. Ibid.
39. As she does in her discussion of deflection, Cora Diamond, in her discussion of Cavell's notion of *exposure*, brings to light important dimensions of the concept that I would otherwise have missed (see Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality," 69-74).
40. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 433.

> I do not know that there is a confident answer to the question, "How do I know that there are (other) human beings?" [...] To accept my exposure in the case of others seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be.[41]

Whenever I make a judgment about others, I am exposed in several dimensions. First, I expose my own view of others, and (as I have argued above), in doing so I reveal something of myself. Furthermore, in my judgments about others, my capacity as a reader of others is at stake: if my judgments turn out to be false, that failure is likely to be a consequence of my naïveté, my obtuseness, my vulnerability to deception, my rush to judgment, or some other defect. And even if I am not blamable for getting others wrong, my error exposes me to confusion (at least) or danger or injury. From a skeptic's (or anti-skeptic's) point of view, to believe others, to trust others' judgments about oneself, to rely on others to keep their agreements, is to run an unjustified risk. Cavell agrees that being in relationships with others is a risk, and that there is no justification for it of the kind the skeptic demands. But he also charts the costs of refusing to run those risks. As we have seen, to refuse to know others would be to exile oneself from personal relationships, to live as an outsider, even if you continue to inhabit a community.

Skeptics might well grant that, our nature being what it is, it is inevitable that we seek and claim knowledge about one another's minds. Still, they can press the question: but is such a life rational? Your answer to this will reveal what kind of philosopher you are and what stance you take towards our (putative) lives together. In doing philosophy, we are exposed.

41. Ibid., 439.

III. Music and Meaning

5. The Banality of Music: Cavell's Aesthetic Turn

VICTOR J. KREBS

> One can [...] conceive of a continuous acoustic flow that traverses the world and embraces even silence. A musician is someone who appropriates something of this flow.
>
> GILLES DELEUZE,
> "Vincennes Session of April 15, 1980, Leibniz Seminar"

1. Prelude

Cavell began life as a musician and came to philosophy because of a vocational crisis. As a composer he felt he was not saying anything with his music. In his autobiography he records one of the first moments where his change of heart dawned on him. Composing a musical arrangement for a production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* at Berkeley, he writes:

> I came not without considerable anxiety, to the first clear inklings, consciously and unforgettably, that I was more interested in the actions and ideas and language of the play, and in learning and understanding what might be said about them and what I thought I had to say about them, than I was in the music in which I expressed what I could of my sense of those actions and ideas in the words [...].[1]

Looking back on that first realization, it is as if that departure were from the start aimed at a return; Cavell's crisis appears in retrospect as a calling to re(dis)cover music in philosophy. Indeed, what he seemed to leave behind becomes the sought

1. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 215.

prize of the battle he waged in his idiosyncratic thought against the philosophical tradition from the start. In 1999, a few years before he drafted his autobiography, the last book he published, in a lecture at Harvard in honor of the music critic, theorist and composer, David Lewin, he wrote:

> Something I have demanded from philosophy was an understanding precisely of what I had sought in music, and in the understanding of music, of what demanded that reclamation of experience, of the capacity for being moved, which called out for, and sustained, an accounting as lucid as the music I loved [...].[2]

So, philosophy replaced music, but it retained for him the aspirations that went into music, and in J.L. Austin's theory of performatives, he envisaged clearly the possibility of a philosophy that satisfied that sensibility. In his work on passionate utterances, he moves towards what we may conceive as his own remarriage, where he gets back together with music, just as in the genre of films he discovered, "a somewhat older pair who are already together past some inner obstacle between them [get] together *again*."[3]

In this paper I want to explore what that remarriage involves. I will follow the intuition that it is his trauma with music that triggers what I want to call the aesthetic turn in his philosophy, which I see enacted not only in his reframing of skepticism — seeing it no longer as an intellectual problem but as an existential task — or in his adoption of Wittgenstein's (and Emerson's and Thoreau's) *descent* to the ordinary, opposing metaphysical abstraction, but also, and most importantly, in his extension of J.L. Austin's theory of performatives to the perlocutionary in passionate utterances. What I am calling his aesthetic turn leads him to forge a space for a new kind of philosophical discourse, not of knowledge but of acknowledgment, where — I will claim — a "musical aesthetic" enters the philosophical equation.

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2. Cavell, *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 260.
3. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10.

2. The Trials of Finitude: The Loss and Recovery of Voice

Particularly in its dependence on having or developing an ear for the peculiar soundings of our ordinary words, Austin's focus on performatives constitutes a turn towards the concreteness of sensible experience as constitutive of linguistic meaning, and a first step towards vitalizing speech, infusing feeling into thought, passion into language. Insofar as it zeroes in on the traditionally neglected relation of passion and speech,[4] it opened the way for bringing a musical sensibility into philosophy for Cavell. But whereas Austin seems to succumb to the Enlightenment's prejudice against the aesthetic in taking the expression of desire as merely incidental, for Cavell "the passional side of utterance" is not "a detachable issue."[5] Indeed, as he explains, "from the roots of speech two different paths spring: that of the responsibilities of implication; and that of the rights of desire."[6] And while Austin's performatives offer us "participation in the order of law," Cavell is interested further in the "improvisation in the disorders of desire,"[7] to which passionate utterances invite us. The power of words when it comes to desire no longer resides merely on agreed upon social conventions and pregiven rules, but rather emerges from the richly complex and fluid field of interrelated vital forces in the realm of passion. Desire follows a very different agenda and requires a much greater disposition to vulnerability than reason, often threatening the stability, structure, and security it offers.

Behind the traditional resistance to passion lurks not so much a justified demand for intellectual rigor as perhaps what Cavell calls a terror at the realization that "maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss)."[8] Once we enter the disorders of desire, we are forced to give up the illusion of control and must rely on our own inner compass in the willingness for change and transformation. So, one must be willing, so to speak, to *play it by ear* despite the uncertainty of the world, and despite the philosopher's traditional

4. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 156.
5. Ibid., 163.
6. Ibid., 185.
7. Ibid.
8. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 178.

scruples about what is acceptable and serious and what not; one must be disposed "at each point" for the "experience of a conversion, of being turned around."[9]

> Whether an expression is remarkable or casual, where this turns out to be a function of whether we leave the expression ordinary or elevate it into philosophy, [...] depends on escaping our sense, let us say, of the ridiculous [...]. Philosophy [...] turns out to require an understanding of how the seriousness of philosophy's preoccupations... its demand for satisfaction, its refusal of satisfaction — how this seriousness is dependent on disarming our sense of oddness and non-oddness, and therewith seeing why it is with the trivial, or superficial, that this philosophy finds itself in oscillation, as in an unearthly dance.[10]

But we refuse the dance with the trivial, shun the task the ordinary demands from us and recoil to the distraction and protection of skepticism, which, like a shield, saves us from confronting what is before us, afraid that the ordinary will prove too banal, that our expectations will be frustrated.

The risk is most frightening as we move from the order of law to the disorders of desire. We are all quite equal in our knowledge and use of language under conventional conditions; locutionary and even illocutionary uses such as promising, authorizing, betting, bequeathing, endorsing, etc., since they rest on sedimented foundations of social convention and habit, reinforce our sense of control. But the perlocutionary effect of attempts "to convince, amuse, appall, excite, astonish, deter, inspire, etc.," as Cavell observes, requires "further perception and talent both to create and then to judge the effects of our words."[11] But the descent to ordinary language ushers us into the territory of spontaneity and undecidability that demands what Cavell calls "a sense of discovery of the world," a kind of faith and courage before the contingent, without which ordinary language and its examples "would fail in their imagination."[12]

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9. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 62.
10. Ibid., 166-67.
11. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 495.
12. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 162.

The difficulty of that demand together with the indeterminacy of its outcome explains the propensity to disavow the expressiveness of the ordinary, to marginalize or denigrate the aesthetic in our search for philosophical knowledge. We thus make ourselves blind, for example, to the expressiveness of the body so that "we turn [it] [...] into an impenetrable integument [...] [wanting] to place the mind beyond reach, [...] get the body inexpressive"[13] or, in the same vein, we make ourselves deaf to the meaning of our words, by fleeing to metaphysical abstractness where we find the security and safety of well-fixed concepts but end up disconnecting our words from the forms of life where they acquire their meaning, "as if driven," Cavell says, "to some sort of emptiness."[14] It is in that sense, that in their demand to descend to ordinary language both Austin and Wittgenstein provide "ways of outlining the suppression of the voice chronic to philosophy."[15]

We fail in imagination before the ordinary out of fear. Fear of failure or disillusionment, fear of having to acknowledge our frailty and precariousness that in the end deprives us of a voice. Cavell's whole project may be seen as an attempt to dissolve that paralysis, that impulse to emptiness, by quickening the sensibility, cultivating the imagination and the ability to listen, so as to look at things with the same intelligence of a musical ear and attain the insight behind the banality of the ordinary. The mechanisms and dynamics that underlie that compulsive blindness to the natural expressiveness of human nature, its veiled evasion of the vulnerability it entails, in other words: the skeptical impulse, is at the heart of Cavell's philosophy. Indeed, in that light, his discovery of Austin becomes a path towards the recovery in philosophy of the voice he had left behind in his crisis. His extension of Austin into the perlocutionary becomes thus a bridge to the recovery of the human voice: "I have characterized [Austin's] work, along with the practice of the later Wittgenstein, as accomplishing the return of the human voice to philosophy, that is, providing methodical ways of outlining the suppression of voice chronic in philosophy."[16]

Cavell's detailed examination of passionate utterances, his stress on the perlocutionary, provides philosophy the implements to cultivate the ear, the

13. Ibid., 163.
14. Ibid.
15. Cavell, *Here and There*, 248.
16. Ibid.

sensitivity to the human voice it neglects in rejecting the aesthetic density of our words as they modulate sentiment, affect, feeling. Music seeps slowly back into his philosophical thinking in virtue of a turn to the aesthetic.

3. Acknowledgement

The words used in passionate utterances are not constative words, they rely for their meaning not just on their given definitions, nor merely on the set conventions that grant them the power to get things done (baptizing, insulting, promising, etc.). They rely on our powers of improvisation and aesthetic discernment, on the natural spontaneity and resonance of desire that opens its own path. I cannot tell you to *feel* what I am feeling, and then continue our conversation with the same assurance I can if I tell you to hold on to that fork or dial this number. We must build the bridge to make these experiences shareable, to bring you in to see what it is I am talking about. My language, my gestures, my voice must lead you to that feeling, and I will always rely on our mutual attunement, on a shared sensibility, an aesthetic and temperamental confluence for that to be possible. If I want you to see what I see and share what I know, I will have to recreate for you — in my sentences and the experiences to which they appeal, in the words I stress, in their tempo, tone and rhythms even, in my gestures and the associations they suggest and the images they evoke — the same imaginative conditions under which I have experienced the object, the scene, the events I am talking about, and under the particular aspect I am trying to get you to experience them. This happens all the time in what Cavell identifies as the discourse of acknowledgment, where what I am seeking is that you understand how it is with me — not necessarily for you to agree with me, but for you to get me.

In the grammar of the perlocutionary what one means by one's words is calibrated not in propositions, not in meanings, but in the conditions of possibility of the aesthetic.[17] It is the same as what happens with the expressions of aspect-dawning, where suddenly our impression of an object changes even though nothing in the object has changed. As William Day explains,

17. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After*, 83.

> Knowing in these (moral and aesthetic contexts) doesn't have the shape of a proposition to which is added the appropriate grounding or justifying experience; it has a quite different shape. Knowing here is more like cases of sudden recognition ("I know that face," "I know that move") that can change in a flash every element of one's perception. To express *this* knowledge requires that one give expression to those features or that gesture, to that sight or sound. In that light, [the issue] is not so much about what cannot be said or expressed as about what we mean when we say that we know (or see or hear) something of the sort. […] "Describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it."[18]

In passionate utterances we are challenging the other to come closer to us, and we do so always by appealing to their reactions and gauging them against our expectations. We are dealing here with understanding or knowledge that is not propositional but intuitive, empathic, aesthetic. It requires attention to the imponderables that give shape to routes of feeling; it requires a different eye and a better ear than the traditional philosopher's, always attentive to logical connections and consistency and linear reasoning. There is no systematic doctrine nor pre-given criteria, so it involves not so much recognition as an openness to (joint) creativity. It requires what Daniele Lorenzini, following Cavell,[19] characterizes as acknowledgement:

> Acknowledgment is not purely recognitive but creative, and instead of working within the boundaries of a pregiven normative framework, it constitutes an essential condition for the cooperative effort to transform both ourselves (our current identities) and the norms we live by.[20]

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18. William Day, "Words Fail Me. Stanley Cavell's Life out of Music," in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 191.
19. "We think skepticism must mean that we cannot know the world exists, and hence that perhaps there isn't one (a conclusion some profess to admire and others to fear). Whereas what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be accepted; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known but acknowledged." Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 298.
20. Daniele Lorenzini, "Acknowledgment Is Not Recognition: On the Perlocutionary Dimension of Our Normative Practices," in *The Philosophy of Recognition: Expanded Perspectives on a Fundamental Concept*, ed. Matt Congdon and Thomas Khurana (New York: Routledge, forthcoming), 8.

Likewise, Wittgenstein understands propositions of subjective experience, "expressive utterances" (*Äußerungen*) as he calls them, as "reactions in which people find each other,"[21] a field of meaning where intimacy and community can occur, and self-transformation can happen. Passionate utterances are not meant to produce knowledge either, and hence have nothing to do with truth or falsity; over and above reaching agreement or the establishment of truths, they have to do with coming together and making ourselves intelligible to one another. Their purpose is acknowledgement rather than knowledge. Already we are moving away from the objective of traditional philosophical discourse, for instead of shunning the aesthetic or neglecting the emotional and affective, we place it at the center and make it the point.

4. Music and Philosophy

Wittgenstein wrote that "understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme."[22] Cavell paraphrases him "understanding a sentence is hearing the music that shapes its life,"[23] which he contrasts to the view of language, contested by Wittgenstein, according to which understanding a sentence is knowing the meanings or references of its individual words. He further locates what causes the flight from the ordinary and hence the loss of the human voice in the philosopher's inability or unwillingness "to imagine, to participate in — to hear the music of — the dense contexts within which speech makes its specific sense."[24]

Deaf to that music, the metaphysician de-souls speech in his attempt to understand its meaning outside "the dense contexts within which [it] makes its specific sense,"[25] in other words, outside the language games and forms of life — the whirl of organism – where their music becomes audible. The density here is the density of the bodily, of sentiment, affection, feeling, eros, attraction. Language

21. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §874.
22. Ibid., §527.
23. Cavell, *Here and There*, 280.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.

without music is language without love. Lovelessness was, after all, something Cavell combatted in the philosophical milieu of his beginnings, particularly.[26] But that battle also becomes the ticket which finally pays his dues to music, the vocation he renounced; a sort of final tribute to the crisis that led him to philosophy, in "a recognition of music [...] as a figure for the mind in its most perfected relation to itself, or to its wishes for itself."[27]

Cavell explicitly links the musical — the capacity to make and appreciate music — "with our caring about finding the right words, developing an ear for what is said when, why it is said, how, and in what context."[28] According to Wittgenstein, we are able to choose and value words because of what he calls "our attachment to our words" (*die Anhänglichkeit an [unsere] Worte*).[29] Without it, they become "cold, lacking in associations," no longer "an acorn from which an *oak tree* can grow."[30] He thus explicitly implicates the bodily as crucial to our ability to recognize a word's "familiar physiognomy," or to feel "that it has taken up its meaning into itself, that it is an actual likeness of its meaning,"[31] all attempts to introduce into our understanding of language an aesthetic dimension in what amounts to an instance of what I am calling Cavell's aesthetic turn, which, by the way, belongs in the constellation of Wittgenstein's interest in seeing aspects.[32]

But Cavell's appeal to the density of the bodily is not a reference to something inexpressible behind the words, as he himself is emphatic in clarifying. The claim in the instance of music is "on the contrary, that expression has (in principle) occurred, in principle perfectly; it is merely the responsibility of each of its recipients to come to terms with his or her experience."[33] That we tend to consider that appeal to the bodily as referring us to the unsayable is another symptom of our prejudice against the aesthetic derived from our representational paradigm, in other words, to the primacy we give to symbolization, that dismisses other ways of knowing and consciousness.

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26. See my "The Finer Weapon: Cavell, Philosophy, and Praise," in *Cavell's Must We Mean What We Say? at 50*, ed. Greg Chase, Juliet Floyd, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 167-78.
27. Cavell, *Here and There,* 260.
28. Ibid., 12.
29. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §218.
30. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 52.
31. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §218.
32. See my "The Bodily Root: Seeing Aspects and Inner Experience," in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 120-39.
33. Cavell, *Here and There*, 254.

We normally suppose the body is psychically mute, "always awaiting the civilizing influence of the thinking mind."[34] But perhaps the mind disabused of the civilizing influence is capable of perceiving that the muteness of the body is not psychically meaningless (that there can be understanding of another sort, without meaning in the representational sense), that it involves not just "a primitive, id-like realm, its crude impulses barely able to cross over from the terra incognita of biology to the meaning-filled world."[35]

Behind this prejudice against the bodily and the aesthetic, as Christoph Cox makes clear, is the belief that experience is always mediated by the symbolic field, which breeds a deep suspicion of the extra symbolic, extra textual, or extra discursive, viewing such a domain as either inaccessible or non-existent. But this is nothing other than

> a provincial and chauvinistic anthropocentrism [...], for it treats human symbolic interaction as a unique and privileged endowment from which the rest of nature is excluded. [...] human beings inhabit a privileged ontological position elevated above the natural world. [This] manifests a problematic Kantian epistemology and ontology, a dualistic program that divides the world into two domains, a phenomenal domain of symbolic discourse that marks the limits of the knowable, and a noumenal domain of nature and materiality that excludes knowledge and intelligible discourse.[36]

We are touching, however, not an unsayable realm but the point of emergence of ever new words seeking understanding. The issue is not what is unsayable but what kind of knowing is still possible beyond the words. The body in its particular vitality and modulation is the ground from which words with an understanding outside the realm of symbolization can emerge, interminably. The permanent effort to make oneself intelligible to the other, especially in passionate utterances, where we seek both understanding and acknowledgement amidst the intense complexity and

34. Adam Blum, Peter Goldberg, and Michael Levin, *Here I'm Alive: The Spirit of Music in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 4.
35. Ibid., 4.
36. Christoph Cox, "Beyond Representation and Signification: Toward a Sonic Materialism," *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 2 (2011): 147.

unpredictability of the erotic that lines all our utterances, depends on opening a space of reflection around the body. Perhaps, as Blum, Goldberg and Levin suggest, the body does "speak" (and is spoken to) "in a register involving the patterning of sensation rather than pictorial or symbolic thought [which] would mean that the body is given psychical organization only secondarily by phantasy or thought or language, all the while organizing itself primarily according to a shared pattern of sensory, somatic organization."[37]

What we have been calling Cavell's return to music involves a revisioning of the presuppositions of philosophical thought, what I have called an aesthetic turn, that involves the deepening of the move to ordinary language into a non-representational perspective: "No longer to give a central place to symbolization and figuration but to "nonrepresented (or simply presented) types of experience and communication that are centered on the vicissitudes of attention, sensory perception, and psychophysical phenomena."[38]

Instead of talking of music as a language without meaning, as Levi-Strauss does, Cavell talks about music as a system of communication that involves *an understanding* without meaning. He thus liberates the musical from the requirements of symbolization that would turn it into something mute or empty, and instead introduces an understanding that "is endless, in which everything that happens is to be taken as significant, and nothing does, or need come, as an isolated or incontestable meaning."[39] It is not surprising that Cavell considers "Wittgenstein's invoking the understanding of a musical theme as a guide to philosophical understanding, [...] call it the promise of an understanding without meanings, [...] a utopian glimpse of a new or undiscovered relation to language, to its sources in the world, to its means of expression."[40]

6. Coda

In the move towards understanding without meaning, Cavell is making a gesture towards bringing the non-representational dimension of the musical into the

37. Blum, Goldberg, and Levin, *Here I'm Alive*, 4.
38. Ibid.
39. Cavell, *Here and There*, 253.
40. Ibid., 261

philosophical understanding of language. Of course, where language is conceived as representation or its signifying powers as related to a correlationism between thinking and being, this attempt to bring in the testimonial, living presence of words, their embeddedness in the vitality of forms of life, may seem to fall outside the "province of a study of language as such"[41] because they can be performed even without saying anything, or if they are performed by saying something, they often need non-linguistic "help" to be successful.[42]

But perhaps rather than rule it out, we must revise our conception of language.

Taking a similar aesthetic turn in psychoanalysis as the one we have been attributing to Cavell in philosophy, Adam Blum, Peter Goldberg and Michael Levin point out that, although we have lacked "an adequate language to describe the elaborate and evolved ways in which this sentient body is organized, the ways in which the semiotics of movement and patterning of sensation shape the nonrepresentational domain of lived experience," perhaps music, "something that is so fundamental to our sense of meaning and being in the world yet so independent of words for the way it orders our experience" can help us imagine this.[43]

Of course, standing against that suggestion is the belief that meaning is a conscious, intellectual, linguistic human creation. But if we take Wittgenstein's words: "What has to be accepted, the given is — so one could say — forms of life,"[44] not as referring merely to shared beliefs and opinions, but also to our mutual attunement in natural reactions, in our words as extensions of the body and gestures,[45] then perhaps we can broaden our conception of language to a system of communication, as Cavell does, in order to introduce the notion of understanding without meaning [46] that liberates us from the all-embracing and constraining linguistic turn and its exclusive understanding *with* meaning.

In that line, Jonathan Lear, for example, suggests that we need to further elaborate forms of life to include "archaic meaning."[47] The archaic mode of thought or

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41. Jennifer Hornsby, "Illocution and Its Significance," in *Foundations of Speech Act Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic Perspectives*, ed. S.L. Tsohatzidis (New York: Routledge, 1994), 195.
42. Lorenzini, "Acknowledgment Is Not Recognition," 9.
43. Blum, Goldberg, and Levin, *Here I'm Alive*, 4-5.
44. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §226.
45. Ibid., §241-42.
46. Cavell, *Here and There,* 252
47. Jonathan Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 192.

consciousness Lear is talking about may be assimilated, in our present context, with the musicality behind words, the presentational (musical) dimension of existence and consciousness. May it not be a shared pattern of sensory, somatic organization that constitutes the space wherein intelligibility is forged outside or beyond or before entering the realm of representational thought?

Underlying Cavell's philosophy there is a vision of human being split between two worlds, the world we think and the world we live in; of being suspended between the sensible and the intelligible, where the whole philosophical enterprise is conceived as an attempt to deal with that dichotomy, as he suggests in "Knowing and Acknowledging,"

> not as if the problem is for opposed positions to be reconciled, but for the halves of the mind to go back together. This ambition frequently comes to grief. But it provides the particular satisfaction, as well as the particular anguish, of a particular activity of philosophizing.[48]

That particular anguish is ineluctable once we take seriously our paradoxical human nature, which leaves us with the question Cavell asks about the relation between the words with which we try to word our experience with music and the experience music provides us: "If we say that they are the afterlife of such work, two questions arise. What if the experience has passed us by, as surely it sometimes will, on a given performance? And what if this is the only afterlife we are given to know?"[49] Words or music? Which goes first? What can we miss? Radical undecidability, living with our limitation. A place of finitude, of mourning and flight. A philosophy that straddles between music and words, unable to pledge absolute fealty to either or pledging it to both. Always in tension, pressed by the demand of a knowledge that comes to light with language but cannot be fulfilled within it.

Philosophical discourse is thus relocated, to make us aware of our obliviousness to our own voice and our chronic inclination to get lost in our words, to teach us to live "with the sign of our finitude."[50] We are reminded again of the

48. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 223.
49. Cavell, *Here and There,* 286.
50. Cavell, personal communication (1999).

description from the comedies or remarriage, where "a somewhat older pair who are already together past some inner obstacle between them [get] together *again*."[51] For what we witness is a remarriage of philosophy and music that matures the banal to trigger an understanding, a knowledge that is irreducible to theoretical concepts, an acknowledgement that lifts the repression of the human voice. Once the prejudice against the aesthetic is diagnosed, its recovery becomes the task, and music and art become the place to explore our passion and desire to "show, or remind us, or expand our horizons, so that we see, or remember, or learn, what truly matters to us."[52]

51. Cavell, *Cities of Words,* 10.
52. Cavell. *Here and There*, 277.

6. Crisis of Expression

PAUL STANDISH

In Stanley Cavell's "Philosophy of the Unheard," a short lecture on Schoenberg given at a Harvard conference in 1999, two remarks in particular stand out.[1] First, there is his suggestion that there is a relation between the Schoenbergian "row" and the Wittgensteinian "rule." Second, there is the comment he makes, on the strength of his reading of Schoenberg's *Letters*,[2] about the extent to which Schoenberg was preoccupied with being understood. They stand out because they constitute Cavell's most explicit and direct attempt to comment on Schoenberg's work. For the rest, there is much of interest, but the relation to Schoenberg in much of the lecture is indirect or oblique, a factor also significant for the present discussion. The two remarks provide a welcome initial orientation for what I want to say in the present paper.

Cavell lays the way for these two observations through recollections and acknowledgements of a more confessional kind, relating, first, to the "formative and intellectual or spiritual crisis"[3] that led to his discovery that music was no longer to be his life's work and, second, to his realization that what he demanded of philosophy was an understanding of what he had found in music, involving a reclamation of experience to be accounted for in philosophy as lucidly as in the music he loved. He attributes to these aspects of his life the "happy invitation" to him to speak on this occasion. This autobiographical statement is extended in the ensuing recollection of the importance of two friends with whom he shared musical analysis classes, Seymour Shifrin and David Lewin. Their conversations were "scenes of instruction — sublime instances of tracking the work that art does."[4] In fact, it was Lewin, the celebrated music critic, theorist, and composer, in whose honor the present conference had been convened.

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1. Cavell, "Philosophy and the Unheard," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 260-68.
2. Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, ed. Erwin Stern, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).
3. Cavell, "Philosophy and the Unheard," 260.
4. Ibid., 261.

1. Of the Row and the Rule

Let me address directly the question of the relation between the Schoenbergian "row" and the Wittgensteinian "rule." Any comparison depends upon how each of these is to be conceived, and neither is straightforward. Suppose we take as an initial assumption the idea that what Wittgenstein intends in his various examples of a child coming into a language game is that the child's behavior be understood as becoming patterned by the rules established in the society: the child is guided and corrected by adults in a process that grooves the child into the expected standards of behavior in a process of *Abrichtung* — that is, something like the breaking-in and training of an animal. On this view, those rules are more or less stable or fixed, as is the behavior they instill, and they carry the authority of the society's approval. We might think of this as a conservative reading of Wittgenstein, and it is surely one that was widely held in the early, especially Anglophone reception of Wittgenstein's work.

Let us accept also, for the moment, that Schoenberg's dodecaphonic breakthrough and serialism impose a set of rules that the new music must follow. The aim is to achieve a complete break with the dominance of the tonic triad, which for four centuries (and now five) has imposed a conception of harmony (and consonance) according to which some combinations of notes — whether in chords or intervals in a melodic line — are dissonant. The inheritance of such a notion of harmony, in Western music especially, has generated expectations in music that have become naturalized, and this has led to claims by some that these expected combinations are indeed features of the natural world itself and hence of universal significance. They generate, most notably, a sense of musical resolution: a dissonance resolves into a consonance; a cadence at the end of a piece lands safely in the tonic triad; and these things produce a satisfaction that seems natural. Yet the development of Western music in the centuries in question reveals a gradual and partial move away from the dominance of the tonic triad, key markers of which would be the dissonances introduced in Beethoven's late quartets, the "chromatic" proliferation of half-tones in Liszt and Debussy, and the unsteadying of the sense of what the tonic key *is* — in, for example, Richard Strauss. Each of these — in its time, at least — encountered resistance from audiences, who found it hard to make sense of

what they were hearing; but each also becomes a breakthrough in terms of what music can be.

Schoenberg's innovations constitute a further and more radical attempt to *emancipate* dissonance, and he does this by imposing a rule that prevents any tonic key from surreptitiously gaining dominance. The music thus created is often described as "*atonal*," though this is a misnomer to the extent that the music remains committed to the accepted twelve semitones that are seen (and repeated in different registers) on the piano keyboard. The release is from the dominance of the tonic triad, and this achieves, as it were, a new equality between the twelve tones; hence, there is no key signature, either literally in its inscription or figuratively in the music's *feel* or mood. The rule is that all twelve notes must be sounded before any one is repeated. A patterning is then achieved by repeating the initial sequence, reversing it, inverting it, or reversing the inversion. One can easily imagine a computer being programmed to produce music in this way.[5]

Now this stark system of rules does seem to have a rigidity about it and to constitute a radical break with the past. In the latter respect, it seems to contrast with the familiar conservative reading of Wittgenstein's later work: Wittgenstein does not institute a new set of rules but brings words back to the ordinary use that is their home. In the former respect, by contrast, as a system of more or less fixed rules, it does resonate in some degree with the conservative reading — that is, the grooving of the child into expected patterns of behavior: there is a convergence perhaps in that both seem to require — respectively, from the composer and from the child — submission to rules that are not to be compromised.

Yet something seems to be going badly wrong here — wrong especially because this conformist Wittgenstein is hardly what we find in Cavell, and wrong also because this is a caricature of Schoenberg's innovations. I shall elaborate on each of these points, but first I want to consider why the manner of this comparison should even be entertained. The phrasing of Cavell's suggestion, fairly late in the paper, that "the Schoenbergian idea of the row with its unforeseen yet pervasive consequences is a serviceable image of the Wittgensteinian idea of grammar and its elaboration of

5. A computer can be programmed to produce music firmly embedded in a tonic key, but then the basis for the music seems to be prevailing sensibilities, not the rational system.

criteria of judgment"[6] seems to work towards a potentially persuasive conception of the contiguity of these two lines of thought. Here Cavell speaks of "grammar." But at the point where the parallel is introduced, the comparison seems to turn more specifically on "following a rule."[7] He writes:

> The strangeness of Wittgenstein's power, if that is what it is, is tied to the abruptness of his difference from the expected sound of philosophy, say of its pitch sequences (within which, of some fascination for the Schoenbergian ambience of this weekend, the idea of a series, as in the instance of following a rule, plays a notorious role), manifested in the apparent poverty of Wittgenstein's means.[8]

The phrasing here is characteristically subtle, if potentially ambiguous, and it deserves some exegesis. The novel and guiding thought is that the *Investigations* might be characterized in terms of "pitch sequences," sequences that (far from being governed by the familiar principles of the well-honed argument): establish nodes of connection that are striking in their originality; overlap in various ways; find continuities that sometimes seem natural, sometimes surprising, and sometimes go back to retrace ground; and reiterate a motif or echo an earlier passage, approaching a topic from a different angle. It successfully recalls thoughts in Wittgenstein's *Preface* to his book, in which the work is said to bring together, in the 693 uneven numbered paragraphs of its main text, the "precipitate of investigations into meaning, consciousness, understanding" and much more. It comprises, Wittgenstein writes, sketches of landscapes that are the products of the "natural inclination" of thought.[9] It is a collection of remarks, "really just an album,"[10] the casualness of which expression shows that this is not a systematic collection, arranged hierarchically by genus and species: rather, that thought is allowed to flow, from one topic to another, by way of overlaps and contiguities. This is closer to the way we

6. Cavell, "Philosophy and the Unheard," 267.
7. Ibid., 261.
8. Ibid.
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 3.
10. Ibid., 4.

normally think. Its examples are not instances of common types but samples that constitute different cases, where thought is guided by analogy.[11]

The parenthesis in Cavell's long sentence is in part his gently humorous gesture towards the "Schoenbergian ambience" of the weekend. But this is tempered by the association of the idea of a series with notoriety, a taint that is further extended, tilting at Wittgenstein's interpreters, to the idea of following a rule. While the former gesture might be read as a mild tease over the pieties of enthusiasm and anxieties over orthodoxy that had been aroused in some quarters by the new music, the slur of *notoriety* acknowledges something of Cavell's own struggles both with aspects of that music and with the interpretative damage that has been done by overreliance on the significance in the *Investigations* of the idea of following a rule.[12] In Cavell's "Music Discomposed" there are passages where his skepticism about the new music comes to the fore, not least because of its over-theorization. The music, he writes, was "philosophical if it was nothing else."[13] Adherence to systematic rules, and even the aesthetic appeal of the written score, seemed to have gained as much importance among some of its afficionados as the sound of the music that was actually produced. And throughout his discussions of Wittgenstein, he is critical of the interpretation of rules in the conformist or conservative way sketched above. Two salient factors may help to illustrate the ways that these points come together. The "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language" provides vivid examples of ways in which the following of a pattern of word-use extends into the projection of that word into new circumstances, in ways that cannot be foreseen;[14] in "Music Discomposed," much of the discussion revolves around questions of improvisation, relevant to the performer and the composer, and this raises questions regarding the consequences of

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11. Cavell's offers a fruitful discussion of these matters in "The World as Things," in *Here and There*, an essay that might itself be seen as an anthology of remarks, its 18 numbered sections proceeding not in a linear fashion so much as by association and connection. For a related discussion of Cavell and series, see my own "Small Acts," in *Television With Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. David LaRocca and Sandra Laugier (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2023). See also Sandra Laugier, *TV-Philosophy: How TV Series Change Our Thinking* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2023).
12. There is also a hint here of Cavell's sense of the notoriety he had exposed himself to by writing philosophically about series, especially in respect of television and film – a further muted gesture of sympathy.
13. See Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
14. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), ch. VII.

attempts by the composer both to close down the scope for such improvisation and to open it fully.[15]

2. A Method of Composition

The idea that Schoenberg's major innovation comprises the imposing of a stark set of rules, and that a proper appreciation of his music requires sophisticated theoretical understanding, is roundly rejected by his friend and former pupil, the composer Roberto Gerhard:

> The "method of composition with twelve tones related only to one another" — as Schoenberg called it — is just what it says it is: a method of composition. It cannot, therefore, be too strongly emphasized that it is entirely and exclusively the concern of the composer. It does not concern the listener at all. Above all, the listener must not believe that, if only he knew more about it theoretically, he might find 12-tone music less difficult. This is a hopeless delusion. He will find it easier to listen to only if he hears more of it, often enough. He must, of course, learn how to listen to it, but this will come only from listening itself; and he must remember that it is the *music*, and nothing but the music which matters. It must particularly be stressed that the listener is not supposed to detect the "series" on which a given piece of 12-tone music is based, as if it were Ariadne's thread: or to follow the ways in which it is woven into the sound-fabric. [...] To insist, however, that the 12-tone technique is no concern of the listener is not to say that he is not affected by it. [...] The fact that the listener may remain unaware of the specific effect it has on him does not in the least detract from the reality of that effect: just as there can be no doubt that an intelligent listener who is yet entirely ignorant of the principle of tonality may still entirely enjoy, and even form a valid aesthetic judgement of, a piece

15. John Cage's "4'33," where the music is opened not to improvisation but to chance, would be a key variant of the latter.

> written, say, in C major. For this is the real issue: the 12-note technique must be understood as a new principle of tonality.[16]

It seems to me that it is easy to get stuck on the idea of the twelve-note series as a singly-voiced melodic line, with its ensuing repetitions, inversions and reversals. I do not wish to deny what might be achieved by the intervals in the melodic line, their rhythm, their instrumentation, and so on, but focusing on the singly-voiced melodic line hides the fact that the all twelve notes can be included in a single chord or, to be more pertinent, two hexachords. The density of hexachords and the contrast between any two thus contrived achieves a quality that goes beyond the melodic line, and this is an important and powerful feature of the music that Schoenberg produced. This technique also reflects something closer to a natural impulse that had arisen with the move in the 19th century towards greater chromaticism. This impulse is towards covering all the notes or filling the chromatic space. Shifting emphasis towards such qualities of texture can be a release from the inclination to detect the pattern — in listening to the music or in reading the score(!) — and it can, perhaps, reveal something closer to the "pitch sequences," the different textures of the textual shifts, that Cavell finds in the *Investigations*. Add to this Schoenberg's exploitation of recurrent motifs in different registers, different rhythms, different tempi, different orchestration, and different contexts, and the traversing of the musical terrain becomes more analogous to the movement of thought that Wittgenstein's *Preface* describes.

It is not surprising that, in the five papers that make up Part III of *Here and There*, Cavell refers several times to Wittgenstein's remark late in the *Investigations*:

> Understanding a sentence in language is more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a spoken sentence is closer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme.[17]

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16. Roberto Gerhard, "Tonality in Twelve-note Music," *The Score*, May 1952, quoted in Malcolm MacDonald, *Schoenberg* (London: J.M. Dent, 1976), 88-89.
17. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §527.

The acceptance of this, without turning it into a theory, can also release sensitivity to those aspects of ordinary language philosophy that are attuned to what is other than the constative — or, as it might be put in broader terms, to the "force" of what is expressed, performative *and* constative being different kinds of force. Similarly, I take the earlier remark "All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place"[18] to align with the insistence, on the part of Gerhard and Schoenberg, on the priority of listening over theorization.

There is no doubt that the new music did provoke excesses of theorization, an extreme example of which is the work of Josef Matthias Hauer. Malcolm MacDonald explains that, independently of Schoenberg and even in the crucial years between 1908 and 1919, Hauer developed a method of twelve-note composition involving forty-four *tropes*, which systematically divided the 479,001,000 possible combinations of the twelve chromatic pitches.[19] Perhaps Hauer can be dismissed as eccentric. Schoenberg himself was strongly critical of attempts to decipher the series in the music. In a letter dated 27 July 1932, he congratulates Rudolph Kolisch — his brother-in-law and leader of the Kolisch String Quartet — on working out the series in his Third String Quartet and, touching in the irony a little more, doubts whether he would himself have had the patience. "But," he asks,

> Do you think one's any better off for knowing it? I can't quite see it that way. My firm belief is that for a composer who doesn't yet quite know his way about with the use of series it may give some idea of how to set about it – a purely technical indication of the possibility of getting something out of the series. But this isn't where the aesthetic possibilities reveal themselves, or, if so, only incidentally. I can't utter too many warnings against overrating these analyses, since after all they only lead to what I have been dead against: seeing how it is *done*; whereas I have always helped pupils to see: what it *is*! I have repeatedly tried to make Wiesengrund see this, and also Berg and Webern. But they won't believe me! I can't say it often enough: my works are twelve-note *compositions*, not *twelve-note* compositions: in this respect people go on

18. Ibid., §109.
19. Malcolm MacDonald, *Schoenberg* (London: J.M. Dent, 1976), 270.

> confusing me with Hauer, to whom composition is only of secondary importance.[20]

Adorno (Wiesengrund[21]) had been a pupil of Alban Berg, and he was, of course, apart from his other extraordinary achievements, to become a highly revered philosopher of music. Yet his *Philosophy of New Music*, which is principally devoted to Schoenberg and Stravinsky, met with Schoenberg's strong disapproval. No doubt this is surprising, given the enthusiasm for Schoenberg expressed in the book. Adorno writes:

> If of all the arts, music is privileged by the absence of semblance since it makes no image, in fact it has to the best of its ability participated in the semblance characteristic of bourgeois artwork through tireless conciliation of its own specific task and the domination of convention. In this, Schoenberg broke ranks precisely by taking expression itself seriously and by refusing its subsumption to the conciliating universal, which is the innermost principle of musical semblance. His music repudiates the claim that the universal and the particular are reconciled. However much this music owes its origin to an effectively vegetal urge, however much its irregularities in fact resemble organic forms, it is never and nowhere totality. [...] Schoenberg's compositions are the first in which nothing can actually be different from what it is: They are at once deposition and construction. In them there is no remainder of convention, which guarantees the freedom of play. [...] With the negation of semblance and play, music tends toward knowledge.[22]

Casualties of this subsumption to the conciliating universal, and exemplars of bourgeois art and false musical consciousness, extend, in Adorno's scathing attack, to Elgar and Sibelius ("Twenty years ago Edward Elgar's trumped-up fame seemed to be a

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20. Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, ed. Edwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 164-65. Compare Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66: "To repeat: don't think, but look!"
21. Adorno's name was originally Wiesengrund, but he combined his surname with his wife's when their son was born (Wiesengrund-Adorno) and changed his name to Theodor W. Adorno in the course of his application for US citizenship.
22. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 36.

local phenomenon, and Jean Sibelius's fame an exceptional instance of critical ignorance") and to the "pretentious meagerness of Benjamin Britten."[23] Certainly Adorno's praise of Schoenberg's work is not unqualified. He was less enthusiastic about the turn taken in the 1920s, when Schoenberg became committed more fully to twelve-tone technique: "The operations that broke the blind domination of the sonorous material become — through a system of rules — a blind second nature. To this the subject subordinates itself in search of protection and security, despairing of being able to fulfill the music on its own."[24] Those earlier operations achieved a form of expression that was not a semblance of the passions, as in more traditional forms, but rather, as Wassily Kandinsky had put it, "studies of the mind laid bare"; or, perhaps one might say, anticipating a little, a realization of the mind as expression.[25] The shudder of response such music invoked in its audience constituted an overcoming, however temporary, of the false consciousness of the historically constructed ego. Clearly, his preference was for the less systematically constrained, earlier period of Schoenberg's work.

In any case, given Adorno's immense influence, it is not surprising that he is referred to intermittently in Cavell's discussion, in this and other chapters in *Here and There*. Yet Adorno's castigation not only of swathes of apparently highbrow mainstream art but also of popular culture plainly sets him at some distance from Cavell, and, in what are after all comparatively short essays, his ideas are touched on and then set aside, rather than fully engaged.

3. Moses and Aron

A way forward with Cavell's own response to Schoenberg opens in his lecture in the form of his more specific recollection of work by David Lewin, and in this a connection or contrast with Adorno is briefly played out. Cavell recalls having been

23. Ibid., 10.
24. Ibid., 55. Schoenberg himself was enthusiastic about the development, writing — in a letter to Hauer in 1923 — that he felt enabled by the growing system to "compose as freely and fantastically as one otherwise does in one's youth," whilst being "nevertheless subject to a precisely definable aesthetic discipline" (*Letters*, 104).
25. Quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 35.

impressed by Lewin's essay on Schoenberg's unfinished opera *Moses and Aron*.[26] Let us approach this by way of Cavell's remarks about Adorno, specifically about Adorno's response to twelve-tone technique.

Adorno interprets what he calls Webern's "fetishism of the row" as having dialectical force, in connection with which he has recourse to the idea of expressing the inexpressible. Adorno expands on this in lines to which Cavell adds a parenthesis:

> One aspect of this is that twelve-tone music, by force of its mere correctness, resists subjective expression. The other important aspect is that the right of the subject itself to expression [i.e., the right to expression of the individual consciousness in late capitalism] declines. [...] It has become so isolated that it can hardly seriously hope for anyone who may still understand it. [...] Its melancholy disappearance is the purest expression of its terrified and distrustful withdrawal [...]. However, it remains incapable of expressing the inexpressible as truth.[27]

Adorno's expression of this crisis of expression is expanded in his book by way of frequent references to loneliness, melancholy, withdrawal, despondency, anxiety, and shock. Yet his response to the twelve-note system remains equivocal, specifically with regard to how far it remains in thrall to the historical dialectic, as his subheading "Reversal into Unfreedom" suggests.[28] The mechanistic, external nature of the twelve-note system exacts a coldness from the composer, who has escaped,

> as he apotheosizes it, from the heights of the Second Quartet as the "air of another planet."[29] The indifferent material of twelve-tone music now becomes indifferent for the composer himself. Thus, he evades the spell of the material dialectic [...]. Precisely because, for Schoenberg, the material that has become external no longer speaks, he compels it to mean what he wants it to mean,

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26. David Lewin, "Moses und Aron: Some General Remarks, and Analytic Notes for Act I, Scene 1," *Perspectives of New Music* 6, no. 1 (1967): 1-17.
27. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 112; in Cavell, *Here and There*, 264-65 (Cavell's parenthesis).
28. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 92-93.
29. Schoenberg, *String Quartet No. 2 in F sharp minor, Op. 10*, which includes the soprano vocal part with the line "Ich fühle luft von anderem planeten" (I feel air from another planet), from Stefan George's *Entrückung* (*Rapture*).

> and the fissures, especially the striking contradiction between twelve-tone mechanics and expression, become ciphers of such meaning.[30]

That the material no longer speaks seems to be welcomed, notwithstanding a certain ambivalence, because it has been divested of the associations, expectations, and channeled accretions of listening that have sedimented in the course of the development of music dominated by the tonic triad. To this extent then the composer is not caught in a reaction to the tradition, and, hence, still under the spell of a dialectic, but rather has created a mechanics that neutralizes the material, opening possibilities for expression significantly unburdened by, and better able to perceive, the false consciousness that has accumulated. Thus, Adorno continues,

> Schoenberg's inexorability and his style of conciliation stand in the deepest relation to each other. The inexorable music represents the truth of society in opposition to society. The conciliatory music recognizes the right to music that society, as a false society, still has in spite of it all, just as society reproduces itself as a false society and thus, by surviving, objectively provides elements of its own truth. As the representative of the most advanced aesthetic consciousness, Schoenberg touches at the limits of that consciousness in the sense that the legitimacy of its truth refutes the legitimacy that inheres even in a false need.[31]

In the face of these tensions, Adorno's tone remains one of unremitting urgency, and his stance is militant.[32]

What would it take to be persuaded by this? Cavell admits that it requires a fuller trust in Adorno's clarity of experience, as well as in the Hegelian dialectic to

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30. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 93. For Schoenberg's quotation, see Arnold Schoenberg, *String Quartet No. 2 in F sharp minor*, Op. 10, which includes the soprano vocal part with the line "Ich fühle luft von anderem planeten" ("I feel air from another planet"), from Stefan George's *Entrückung* (*Rapture*).
31. Ibid., 94.
32. In a thoughtful review article — "Philosophy of New Music and Roll Over Adorno: Critical Theory, Popular Culture, Audiovisual Media," *Cultural Critique* 70 (2008): 201-7 — Justin Schell draws attention to the excellent translation of *Philosophic der neuen Musik* provided by Robert Hullot Kentor, emphasizing its superiority to the earlier translation by Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley Blomster — *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973). Schell writes that Hullot Kentor "not only expertly corrects the inaccuracies of the old translation but also allows the antagonistic, even radical, character of *Philosophic der neuen Musik* to re-emerge" (202).

which it refers, than he can muster. How, then, is his own sense of a crisis of expression better realized? A possible answer has been supplied by the contrasting response to Schoenberg that he finds in Lewin's paper on *Moses and Aron*.

Lewin's discussion combines general remarks about the opera with analytical notes on the opening scene. Cavell is drawn particularly by the linking of the *dramatic* idea of God, as being unrepresentable but as commanding to be represented, with the *musical* idea of the "row" and its presence in the music. This dramatic idea is to be found in the idea of the row not as an abstraction that can be presented once and for all but rather as manifested everywhere, not abstractly but by means of material sounds and in diverse ways. The structure of this relationship is also played out dramatically in the relationships between God, Moses, Aron, and the *Volk* in a way that "suggestively," as Lewin puts it, prompts the analogy: "the idea" (row), composer (Schoenberg), performer, audience.[33] Moses hears the word of God: ideally he would spend his time in contemplation of this divine order, but God commands that he communicate it to the people. The people, however, do not like him, and he is not capable of speaking to them. Moses does communicate after a fashion with Aron, though he cannot adequately convey the truth that is the burden of his message. Aron is a brilliant speaker who is loved by the people, but he is easily seduced by their adulation. Lewin sets this out in expanded schematic form.

> God loves the Volk (more than He loves Moses, as we gather from Act I, Scene 1) but cannot communicate with them directly, and they do not know or love Him.
>
> Moses knows and loves God; he does not love the Volk, nor they him, though they fear him; he cannot communicate with the Volk.
>
> Aron does not know God, but wants to love Him; he loves the Volk and is loved by them. Note that, in his love for the Volk, Aron is more like God than is Moses. He communicates easily with them.
>
> Moses and Aron (the crucial link) love each other and think they know each other; as it turns out, they do not. The link breaks down, with tragic consequence.[34]

33. Lewin, "Moses und Aron," 2.
34. Ibid.

Much of Lewin's ensuing discussion — the detailed analysis of Act 1, Scene 1 — draws attention to the contrasts between the sung and spoken elements in the work. This is most apparent in the contrast between Moses' *Sprechstimme* and Aron's coloratura tenor, but it extends through sung and spoken elements in the voice of the *Volk*. While I do not propose to explore these in detail, it is important to recognize the significance of this experimentation with voice, which itself accentuates the question of what is at stake in expression. In fact, in various works Schoenberg experiments with the voice, and this extends beyond any simple contrast between singing and speaking. Particular forms, intermediate between singing and speaking, are significant. In *Sprechstimme*, the rhythm of the music is maintained precisely but with only the merest gesture towards the rise and fall of the melody; in *Sprechgesang*, the performer again maintains the rhythm and, as it were, aims at the pitch prescribed but only to let their voice immediately fall away or sometimes rise from this. Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* is a celebrated example of *Sprechgesang*. The effect of these techniques, in their various combinations with singing and speaking, is characteristically to create an experience in which the difficulties of reconciliation between the substance and the means of expression become strangely apparent; the effect is also to heighten an uncanny sense of the wavering qualities of voice on which we depend, the voice that locates us, that realizes where we are. These matters, in turn, foreground questions of expression and voice not as technical difficulties of communication — say, of a reality out there and a thought in here: they realize expression and voice as fundamental to, and generative of, objectivity and subjectivity; and they take voice as the epitome of expression. Voice, we might say, is here *and* there.

4. Abandoning Ourselves, Calling Back the World

These modernist lines of thought are surely not far from the thinking that pervades Cavell's work. In particular, they bear consideration in relation to his own most explicit consideration of the relation between speaking and singing, in "Opera and the

Lease of Voice."[35] The "jigsaw shapes of intuitions" that guide Cavell through his discussion of "what singing betokens" and of the human capacity to "raise the voice" require, he claims, some "conceptual funding," and this cannot come other than from the experience of individual works, especially of opera (and individual instances, one can surmise, of scenes drawn from ordinary life).[36] "The instances will have variously to specify, summarizing my shapes of intuition," he writes,

> the singing in opera as calling back the world, or as expressing its inexpressible abandonment; and singing as (dis)embodied within the doubleness of the human expressed as ecstasy — being beside oneself, perhaps in joy, perhaps in grief — a doubleness taken in the sense of singing out of a world in which a world is intervening, one in which perhaps we belong in abandoning ourselves. This presents singing as thinking; perhaps as narcissistic reflection; narcissism as capturing both the primitiveness of singing's orality and the sophistication of singing's exposure and virtuosic display. The exposure is to a world of the separation of the self from itself, in which the splitting of the self into speech is expressed as the separation from someone who represents to that self the continuance of the world — a separation that may be figured as being forced into a false marriage. The excruciation or absoluteness of this separation seems to partake both of the terror of separation in infancy (the level of primitive narcissism, where the scream in which Wagner heard the origin of singing is still audible) and of a separation from possibility figured by the loss of the one who had descended from the realm of light, in whom one's expectation of intelligibility has been placed, and collapses.[37]

If, in the light of the operatic reference of this passage, my parenthetical surmise about scenes drawn from ordinary life seems presumptuous, it may be helpful to recall Cavell's preparation for this passage, in the closing paragraph of the previous

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35. Cavell, "Opera and the Lease of Voice," in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 129-69.
36. Ibid., 151.
37. Ibid.

section of his text. There he thinks of a version of primitive narcissism — a "self-judgmental forming of the self, as something to be possessed or to be overcome"[38] — as relevant to Emerson's remark that "Character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emits a breath at every moment."[39] Cavell understands this to imply that the signs of our virtue or vice are there in that we are "somehow judging at every moment, necessarily affirming or denying, since we are judged by our judgements (except when we judge not, that we be not judged), in which the heart is revealed."[40] Cavell draws attention to Emerson's transition in the above lines from "communicate" to "breath," which overwhelms any idea of mere communication — that is, of our speaking as fundamentally instrumental — with the recognition of our thoughts' being there in our words, as already in and out, already an ecstasy. The controlled extremity of the breath in singing and the wild loss of control in the scream can alike amplify and call attention to our dependence on voice as the element of our selves and our pains of separation.

But rather than explore this further through the examples of opera that Cavell provides, I propose to turn back to the dramatic tensions in "Moses and Aron" that preoccupy Lewin's reading. Let us recall in particular the "crucial" relationship: "Moses and Aron (the crucial link) love each other and think they know each other; as it turns out, they do not. The link breaks down, with tragic consequence."[41]

My hunch is that the demystifying human touch to Lewin's characterization of this and the other relationships is likely to gain Cavell's trust in a way that dialectical readings do not. Even in the plot-summary style of Lewin's short gloss here ("love each other and think they know each other; as it turns out, they do not"), there is an appeal to tensions and delusions that extend through ordinary lives. But it is crucial (again) that the pairing of Moses and Aron expresses a duality that can be found more widely in the human condition — between, on the one hand, an attraction and duty to others, community with them, and, on the other, an allegiance to something else, often perceived as higher or more truthful and as a calling of some kind. The

38. Ibid., 150.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid. Cavell is alluding to words of Jesus: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." Matthew 7:1-6 (King James Version).
41. Lewin, "Moses und Aron," 2.

latter may take the form of God or the truth, or be understood rather as being-true-to-oneself, or as being able to say what you mean and mean what you say (and in this sense to own your experience). Plainly, something like this pairing is echoed in relationships of kinds that draw Cavell's interest, in opera, literature, film. And equally plainly there is something like this relationship to be found in tensions within one's self. If this is thought to generalize or secularize too much, recall Cavell's remark about Emerson's "self-reliance": that Emerson is fully aware of the etymology that, via the Latin *ligare* (to bind), renews a connection with "religion."

But let me pause. In referring his audience to Lewin's paper, Cavell provides a complex quotation of some ten lines, which itself compresses Lewin's already complex explanation. Cavell holds back from mentioning the schematic elements that Lewin provides, which would have shown what is at stake more succinctly; and while I appreciate that my expansion of the first term in the schema (as the form of God or the truth, or as being-true-to-oneself or being able to say what you mean and mean what you say) may seem casual or opportunistic, I doubt that Cavell would have been wholly at ease with Lewin's expression. Lewin's schema is handy, to be sure, and it brings something important vividly into view. But it is vulnerable to the banality of psychological typology, where the focus would be particularly on a continuum of character extending between Moses and Aron.

Moreover, there is a powerful trajectory to the Biblical story involving the transmission of truth from God to the Volk. Lewin's interpretation of the opera begins to invite a complication of this through the to-and-fro, human dynamism of the relationship between Moses and Aron, as well as in their relationship with the Volk. In Cavell's Wittgensteinian terms, voice — and, hence, the possibility of truth — arises in the language games of this complex dynamism. The to-and-fro breaks up the one-way trajectory, and it displaces any idea of an *arche*: there must, at minimum, be a reticence about naming any first term. This helps to show how the idea and trajectory of a private realm of meaning prior to the public forms of language disappears, is dismissed, as a quasi-Platonist fantasy. Thoughts can be private, we may struggle to find words for them, but this arises out of a background competence, a background of life in the use of words. And this, I shall try to show, can be extended further in order to weaken the metaphysically inflected structure of

the universal and the particular as it dissolves in singularities of speech, thought, and experience. In music, the tonic triad is analogous to the universal, and its fourths and fifths, as well as the multiple possibilities that extend beyond these, are particularities that have their place in cadences that fall finally into the harmony of the tonic. Dissonance gives way to consonance. Leonard Bernstein describes this sense of harmony as, precisely, universal.[42] But in Schoenberg the difference between consonance and dissonance ceases to apply (or at least to apply in the same way), while the contrast between the universal and the particular increasingly misses the point. Dissolving the imperatives of the tonic triad releases the singularities of the notes: it opens space for the germ-cells in Schoenberg's music from which emerge patterns of coherence and connection.

A later essay by Adorno, "Toward an Understanding of Schoenberg," may be helpful here. In this his translator writes of the "particular," the "general," and the "abstract," but a similar point is at issue. Thinking initially of traditional music, Adorno writes:

> It was as if every musical particular was subordinated to an established generality. By listening appropriately, starting from there, one would be able to deduce the development of its particulars in detail and to find one's way with relative ease. Traditional music listened for the listener. This, precisely, is over and done with in Schoenberg.[43]

Listeners must listen for themselves. The only thing that matters in this music is "the particular, the now and here of the musical events, their own inner logic."[44] It is important that this "logic" is of an almost palpable kind: "The decisive thing is the density of composition, which no one ever conceived of before — its concreteness, not its abstraction. Schoenberg leaves nothing unformed; every tone is developed from within the law of motion of the thing itself."[45] It is noteworthy

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42. See Leonard Bernstein, "Twentieth Century Crisis," in *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 263-324.
43. Adorno, "Toward an Understanding of Schoenberg," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 629-30.
44. Ibid., 630.
45. Ibid.

also that Adorno counters the view of Schoenberg as the consummate musical intellectual by referring to him as a "musical vagrant," or perhaps as a "music-maker" rather than a "musician."[46] Adorno's word is "Musikant," a term that can have a slightly negative edge, but whose effect is modified by the inverted commas that Adorno adds: it is clearly invoked in praise of Schoenberg, suggesting the extent of his natural gift for music and his lack of pretension. In contrasting Schoenberg's Wagner-influenced early works with those of Wagner himself, Adorno writes instructively:

> In fact, only a rather dull and externally oriented musicality will fail to perceive the difference between this musical language and Wagner's. It is thoroughly lacking the element of the self-reflexive, the self-admiring, as it were. Everything is turned much more toward the thing than toward the ego, with an apparently altruistic warmth that is completely without the addictive tone of Wagner.[47]

Adorno stresses Schoenberg's aversion to "everything decorative, ornamental, not purely of the thing itself," relating this especially to the Functionalism (*Sachlichkeit*) in architecture of his friend, Adolf Loos: Schoenberg experienced the external musical structure as a false façade, believing that it had to fall to make way for what was "functionally necessary to become audible."[48]

For all the differences that appear in the respective responses of Adorno and Cavell to Schoenberg, the above remarks point to affinities too, and I shall shortly indicate where these are most pertinent. But have I underestimated the connections? Has Cavell? Is Cavell's position in fact much closer to Adorno's, closer perhaps than he is ready to admit? I want to reaffirm my initial sense that Cavell's restrained and somewhat oblique style is relevant to his purpose. Others, however, have found in this a kind of avoidance, even the harboring of a degree of self-deception. Such a line of interpretation is advanced with some confidence by Stephen Decatur Smith in a

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46. Adorno writes in ibid., 631: "Schoenberg, whose intellectualism is legend, was, as a type, a naïve artist. If the term musical vagrant *[Musikant]* had not been so shamefully abused to glorify an unenlightened and uncritical performance, it could be applied to his origins."
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 634-35.

paper entitled "'We Look Away and Leap Around': Music, Ethics, and the Transcendental in Cavell and Adorno."[49]

5. Gigantic Leaps

The essence of Smith's argument is that, for both Cavell and Adorno, "our relation to the conditions of possibility of our collective lives — our forms of life and experience, our common world or worlds — requires that we leap from them or depart from them."[50] On the strength of this judgement, Smith is concerned to show that the "reading of twelve-tone technique that Cavell rejects in Adorno grows from the movement of thought that he and Adorno share."[51] The manner in which Cavell relatively quickly sets aside Adorno's reading amounts to a "swerving" away: "in swerving from Adorno, Cavell swerves from himself as well."[52] Credentials for Smith's discussion are offered in the provision of important quotations from Cavell, including, from *The Claim of Reason*, both the celebrated passage questioning the "natural ground of our conventions" ("What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria…"), with its introduction of the idea of the "education of grownups,"[53] and the evocative account of the small child's coming into language (Cavell's daughter learning the word "kitty").[54] Regarding the latter, Smith is drawn particularly by the idea that in extending the word "kitty" to furry things other than baby cats, the child is making, as Cavell puts it, various "leaps," and by the idea that this leaping, far from being something that the child will simply outgrow, continues to be a dimension of what Cavell will call our "projection" of words, throughout our lives. Hence, the presence of the word in Smith's title. Leaping is further aligned with transcendence: the world we are in is characterized by its false consciousness, and so the leap is a movement of escape from this towards something more real. Indeed it is necessary to "rend the veil," to strip away the clothing of false appearances, to demolish the façade

49. Stephen Decatur Smith, "'We Look Away and Leap Around': Music, Ethics, and the Transcendental in Cavell and Adorno," *Journal of Music Theory* 54, special issue "Cavell's 'Music Discomposed' at 40," (2010): 121-40.
50. Ibid., 122.
51. Ibid., 123.
52. Ibid.
53. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.
54. Ibid., 169-80.

— a concatenation of images consolidating an idea of the "thing itself" that, in various permutations of phrasing, Adorno comes back to and that Smith appears to celebrate. The Biblical origins of "rending the veil" give the discussion a heroic scale, melodramatized even with the subheading "Gigantomachia," which is used to identify Cavell's project in "Philosophy and the Unheard" as the setting up of a contest between Adorno and Lewin — almost as if to emulate the grand scale of Adorno's pitting of Schoenberg against Stravinsky in *Philosophy of New Music*.

There are good reasons not to be moved by this. In the first place, what Cavell intends by "leaps" has a different, less startling, more playful, and in fact more pervasive significance than Smith seems to recognize. Cavell is talking about the ordinary circumstances of our coming into language and our everyday engagement with words, in what we say and in what we think. It is true that our language may lapse into cliché and received ideas, and perhaps that much of our lives is characterized by an average everyday inauthenticity in the way that Heidegger claims.[55] But it is of the very nature of words that they project into new situations and new possibilities, whether we like it or not: in fact, it is precisely this projection that makes possible the use of our words *as words* and not just as something overwhelmingly repetitive like the signs that animals use. This projection or pitching makes possible the engagement of our thought in ways that do not lapse in that fashion but open to new possibilities of our lives and world.[56] Herein lies our pervasive responsibility in what we say and think, a responsibility to ourselves, our community, and the world. Reflecting on his daughter's extended use of the word "kitty," Cavell writes:

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55. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 222.

56. Smith's essay begins with two epigraphs. First, there are lines from a poem by Paul Celan, "The world is gone, / I must carry you." These lines are central to Jacques Derrida's discussion of Celan in "Rams," in *Sovereignties in Question*, trans. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 135-63. In a footnote, Smith states that Derrida's reading of the poem "has been highly influential for this essay, particularly in its formulation of ethics" (121). I draw attention to this here in light of the Derridean form of expression that I have adopted in my discussion at this point. The extremity of the situation to which Celan is responding is far removed from the discussion of "kitty," and hence, for present purposes, the first line of Celan's words here sends Smith off in the wrong direction: Celan, like Derrida and like Cavell, sees our responsibility in words as extending through our lives and world and as generative of culture and world itself. Similarly, the second quotation, from Wittgenstein, "The good is outside the space of facts," from *Culture and Value*, belongs to the thinking of the *Tractatus*, not to Wittgenstein's later philosophy, which is Cavell's concern.

> In each case her word was produced about a soft, warm, furry object of a certain size, shape, and weight. What did she learn in order to do that? *What did she learn from having done it?* If she had never made such leaps she would never have walked into speech. Having made it, meadows of communication can grow for us.[57]

This turning of thought is exemplified here through the fashioning of a series of vocal shifts. The rhythm of the lines lays the way for the rhyming of "leaps" and "speech," accentuated by the alliterative reversal of the P and S, and then, more subtly, as what is at stake expands from the singular child to the community, there is the imperfect rhyme (with "leaps") hiding in the first syllable of "meadows." The expansion is also achieved, subtly again, through the shifting of the pronouns (from the feminine singular child to the grown-up plural), and with a sense of the ramifications of achievement indicated in the movement from "having made such leaps" to "having made it," the colloquial timbre of the latter phrase opening to the "meadows of communication," once again accentuated, with the alliteration of the M. The expansive, even joyful tone of this last phrase does not point at all to an overcoming or rejection of the world that we know but to the continual renewal of its possibilities. This is the world we are in.

In the second place, Smith refers recurrently to the indigence of our condition, where, following Adorno, this is to be seen in a Messianic light. It is true that Wittgenstein and Cavell also will speak of the apparent poverty of our condition, but the stakes here are really very different: the poverty is not (at least, not primarily) anything to do with false consciousness but refers to the fragility of the means by which we make (sense of) our world. It is important that this is not a reverencing of the ordinary, as if what people ordinarily say and do were the answer to our problems; and, of course, the return to the ordinary and the kind of criticism it enables can be the occasion of exposing false consciousness, including the Messianic light in which this might be seen. But to mistake the indigence of false consciousness, dialectically construed, for the poverty of our means of making sense would be drastically to miss the center of gravity in their philosophy — that is, Wittgenstein's

57. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 172.

and Cavell's. Brian Kane's "Introduction" to the special issue of which Smith's paper is a part, gives prominence to a key passage in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, where Cavell writes:

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and communication, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.[58]

This is not a disparagement of the world but a recognition of the need to turn back to it, to turn back to the rough ground, and to turn our words to new possibilities. The poverty to which Cavell and Wittgenstein refer lies in the fact that human activity and community rest upon nothing more than these projections. Nothing more, and nothing less, so that these materials *are* what we need. Kane omits the last line of the paragraph that he quotes, which runs: "To attempt the work of *showing* its simplicity would be a real step in making available Wittgenstein's later philosophy."[59] Poverty then is linked with an idea of simplicity and an aversion from grander forms of explanation, which might themselves generate false pictures, houses of cards, pictures that might hold us captive. Wittgenstein's inclination towards a kind of asceticism also casts poverty as a virtuous turn to simplicity and the ordinary circumstances of our lives and language. The obvious intimation of the ordinary here,

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58. Brian Kane, "Introduction," *Journal of Music Theory* 54, special issue "Cavell's 'Music Discomposed' at 40," (2010): 1-4, quoting Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 48.
59. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 48.

which becomes thematized more fully as Cavell's work progresses, seems to be missed in Smith's reading; and this sends *him* off in the wrong direction.

In fact, the muted slur in the "swerving" from Adorno attributed to Cavell rebounds to some extent in the unsteadiness of Smith's interpretation. One swerves to avoid an obstacle or a crash, and certainly when one is travelling at speed. And Smith, I think, is moving forward too fast as the logic of his argument is expounded. But then, so it might be countered, is not Cavell travelling at speed when he, in "Philosophy and the Unheard," moves through so much in just a few pages? This again would be to miss the tone of his remarks and the occasion of their utterance. Cavell has been invited to give a lecture at a Harvard conference in honor of David Lewin. What he says has the form of a tribute, and this is evident in the text in both content and style. Cavell has fashioned a text appropriate to the occasion, in which acknowledgement of achievement is realized both through personal recollection and gestures of some substance to aspects of Lewin's work. In the process, he entertains a contrast between Lewin and Adorno, but this is nothing like a thoroughgoing critique of Adorno, any more than it is a comprehensive appraisal of Lewin's achievement. In a passage that Smith quotes in part, and to which I alluded earlier, Cavell acknowledges Adorno's views as well as indicating something of his own difficulties with them: "But the full credibility of this effort — whose importance I should not wish to be neglected — depends upon a fuller trust or interest in Adorno's clarity of experience together with his articulation of it in a further Hegelian process of concepts, than I find I can lend to it."[60] Smith's response to this remark is that "The broader context of Cavell's essay [...] offers clues to a fuller reading. Cavell is staging a gigantomachy: Lewin versus Adorno."[61] Who, one might wonder, is staging what?

6. Finding Community

Smith's paper is valuable in bringing out aspects of Adorno's thinking that diverge from Cavell's. This is there in the forthright nature of his discussion, which in turn

60. Cavell, "Philosophy and the Unheard," 265.
61. Smith, "'We Look Away and Leap Around'," 133.

seems to shape his treatment of transcendence and of the thing itself. He guides the reader towards an unquestionably relevant passage in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" but seems to gloss over the carefully qualified terms by which Cavell's views are hedged.[62] It is true that the very nature of projection, the idea of aspect-shifting with its connections to a complete change of view, and the thought often expressed by Wittgenstein, to which Cavell is sympathetic, that one must change one's life can all be related to some kind of transcendence. But there is every reason to be cautious, if not to hold back completely, with such a heavily freighted term. In these pages, Cavell is not so much espousing the idea of the transcendental but feeling his way around the Wittgensteinian idea of grammar and its connections with ordinary language philosophy. He associates this with the kind of thing that Kant was after in speaking of the *a priori* possibility of knowledge. Cavell is providing a description of an aspect of Kant, not signing up to a thesis. With the idea of the "thing itself," so clearly entrammeled with the suspicion of false appearances, the gap between Wittgenstein and Adorno seems wider: in emphasizing the thing itself (the thing-in-itself or the real thing, even at times the condition of nakedness), philosophy is in danger of blinding itself to so much in the ways that human expression and life are realized. Without clothes, where could Stella Dallas be?

Smith also sometimes writes as though Wittgenstein and Cavell have a theory of grammar, which again seems to fall short of an appreciation of the ways in which their references to grammar are made. In the work of neither author is the idea of grammar set out as a thesis: it would be more accurate to say that it is invoked to steer the reader away from certain clearly structured assumptions about the workings of language and thought. The idea of grammar is intrinsically connected to the idea of the language game, which again is a notion that sets out to obstruct the inclination to think in the overly theoretical or systematic ways to which human beings — including philosophers and musical theorists of a kind — are prone. The idea of grammar can fruitfully be illuminated by bringing out its connections to the idea of the background. A language game takes place against a background that can never be exhaustively articulated. So much must always remain unsaid. And this, I think, is somehow reflected in Cavell's style in "Philosophy and the Unheard." Smith is keen to

62. See Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 64-65.

read Cavell in a way that helps to crystallize an argument; but this misses the play of association and connection, and both the significance of withholding judgement and the inclination towards understatement that are very much germane to Cavell's purpose. And there is surely something in Cavell's text that remains unheard in Smith's interpretation.

To say this is to acknowledge the concept advertized in Cavell's title, whose name remains unheard in the main body of his text. What might be gathered under this name? First, Cavell says next to nothing about his opinion of Schoenberg's music. This is, in fact, consistent with the approach he had taken in "Music Discomposed," where his attention was drawn especially by the high profile of the music that developed in the wake of Schoenberg in the mid-20th century and by the extremes of response that music aroused amongst its advocates and its detractors. That essay concentrated more on identifying something about what it was essentially in a composition that constituted *meaning it* — and, yes, he was concerned with the posturing and fakery that could so easily emerge in the process.[63] But in terms of passing judgement on Schoenberg and his immediate associates, he was pointedly reserved, as he is in "Philosophy and the Unheard." It is reasonable to see this not as the willful hiding of a clear opinion but as a continuing ambivalence and humility in the absence of a clear response. There is nothing to suggest that his views are not consistent over this span of nearly four decades. Second, there is an element of the unheard in Cavell's avoidance of further elaboration of differences from Adorno: this is surely not the occasion; but even if the occasion were different, it is possible that Cavell would hold back from pressing an argument he believed would remain unheard. Cavell's remarking on the extent to which Schoenberg was preoccupied with being understood, which I mentioned at the start of this essay, is surely something over which he felt some sympathy, especially given the sense in which, in his own philosophical career, he was so often sidelined by the mainstream: he had good reason to feel that philosophers were not willing to hear what he had to say. There is a poignancy to this also in that Cavell's remark is prompted by his reading of Schoenberg's collected letters, at a time when he was reflecting on his own life,

63. See my "Meaning It: Music, Cavell, and the Sense of Occasion," in *Collection on Here and There*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (forthcoming).

following *A Pitch of Philosophy* and in ways that would come to fruition in *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory*. But third, I want to revert to the relation between the row and the rule, this time revising these terms in the light, respectively, of remarks by Schoenberg and Gerhard about the nature of the row as not the concern of the listener at all, and of the displacing in Wittgenstein of the idea of the rule by that of grammar and the background. With this revision, it becomes possible perhaps to appreciate row and rule as there in the music, there in the language game, but rightly remaining unheard. This, I suggest, indicates the work that Cavell's title does, in the background, as his text unfolds.

An interesting aspect of Adorno's account is to be found in the way that he sees in Schoenberg a realization of music in which the ego is overcome, which, if I have understood correctly, also involves a greater realization of subjectivity and of the subject as agent of the object. Can something like this thought, expressed no doubt in a markedly different tone, be found in Cavell's thinking of the voice in opera as "calling back the world, or as expressing its inexpressible abandonment"?[64] Recall his evocation of the idea of the doubleness of a world in which a world is intervening, where belonging requires a kind of self-abandonment. He speaks of a splitting of the self into speech as involving a separation, a separation figured in opera by "the loss of the one who had descended from the realm of light, in whom one's expectation of intelligibility has been placed, and collapses."[65] This is a dramatic intensification of the phenomenological insight that separation from the other is the condition for one's intelligibility, for having a voice at all. In Adorno's firmly historical, less phenomenological account the successful work of art captures the suffering of the present moment in such a way as to effect a shudder in the subject experiencing the work. There is a destruction, albeit temporary, of the historically and socially constructed ego that is the product of late capitalism. Far from being debilitating, however, this exacts the heightened tension that can amount to a conversion experience: nothing is changed externally, but there is a release to new possibilities. Adorno's subject is agent of the object; Cavell's "voice" is a condition of the world. Certainly it would be wrong to overstate the congruities here, and, as indicated above,

64. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 151.
65. Ibid.

Cavell's emphasis on the variety of things contrasts with the theoretical unity of Adorno's account. But there may be enough here to suggest greater affinities than I have been inclined to suggest. Before returning to *Moses and Aron*, and perhaps allowing these thoughts a little more space to breathe, let me, in closing, take the interpretation in a direction that is more psychoanalytical.

One cannot go far in thinking this way without coming to a major theme of the "autobiographical exercises" that make up the pitch sequences of *A Pitch of Philosophy*. Cavell writes directly about his relationship with his mother and father, and about the sustaining of that pairing in himself. He recalls his mother's ability

> to bring to life whatever notes were put before her. It was precisely not to my mind a knack of interpretation, but something like the contrary, a capacity to put aside any interference, as of her own will, and to let the body be moved, unmechanically, by the mind of those racing notes. The lapse of distance — say that she was the music then and there; there was nothing beyond her to read into — is captured in my mind by an image of a certain mood that caused her to play the piano for herself.[66]

It is a reasonable assumption that this capacity was not separable from her other moods, when for example he found her sitting by herself in silence in a darkened room. But while his mother's musicality was attuned to perfect pitch, there was a different kind of attunement in his father, who, Cavell remarks, "had no natural language left" but who did have an unusual ability to tell stories and a capacity for conversation.[67] Cavell sees his own fascination with Austin as drawing, in some respects, on each of his parents' talents and as inheriting their all-too-human problems. Moreover, it is not difficult to think of these respective abilities of the mother and the father, and the barriers in the relationship between them, as

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66. Ibid., 18.
67. Cavell's father had no natural language left in the sense that the Yiddish and Polish that he had grown up with as a child had faded from his use in the course of his life in the United States. See also my "Something Called Perfect Pitch: Cavell and the Calling of Ordinary Language to Mind," in *Music with Stanley Cavell in Mind*, ed. David LaRocca (New York and London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2024), and, for a related discussion, see Paul Standish, "The Philosophy of Pawnbroking," in *Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Translation: The Truth is Translated*, ed. Standish and Naoko Saito (London: Rowman & Littlefield), 171-82.

reflecting the archetypes provided by the Biblical story and Schoenberg's opera. But the parallel does, admittedly, involve a curious kind of reversal. This is that the part of Moses in the opera is played in *Sprechstimme*, whereas the voice that speaks to the people is a coloratura tenor.[68] Yet this reversal amounts to a relatively superficial difference. The deeper point is that Cavell's mother was, in her playing, something like a pure conduit for the music,[69] and she needed no audience; Cavell's father could perform to the crowd.

Let me press a further parallel, in conclusion, involving the pairing of these tendencies in Cavell himself. Most obviously, and not forgetting Emerson's suggestion that character teaches above our wills, this was there in his character in its distinctive combination of warm sociability and a certain reserve. It can be felt at the heart of his philosophy, precisely in his elaboration of the concept of voice. Such thoughts include but take us beyond the biographical considerations that have been brought into the picture: they take us into the crisis of expression reverberating through the linguistic turn that is a keynote of modernism. To this Cavell's writing bears witness. As with Emerson, this is felt even in the tensions of his prose, which responds to the desire, and indeed *obligation*, both to find community with others and to do justice to oneself, in determining what one can mean and say. I venture to suggest also that there is an intimation here of the "formative and intellectual or spiritual crisis"[70] that led, first, to his discovery that music was no longer his life's work and, second, to his realization that what he demanded of philosophy was an understanding of what he had found in music. Whatever truth or good he had found in his experience of the musical sublime must be transmuted and further realized in the apparent poverty of conversation and community with others. This is perhaps a reclamation of experience as lucid as in the music he loved.[71]

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68. A reversal in the sense that his mother is the (musical) performer, while his father now has no natural language and so is hardly a coloratura tenor!
69. Not so pure as to imply that the music existed like a water-fall, simply, independently of her: music depends upon at least someone's subjectivity.
70. Cavell, "Philosophy and the Unheard," 260.
71. I am grateful to Gordon Bearn and Suzy Harris for thoughtful observations and comments on drafts of this paper. Martin Shuster is thanked especially for very helpful suggestions regarding Adorno.

7. A Scale of Humanity: Cavell on Mahler and Wittgenstein

ERAN GUTER

There is no doubt that Ludwig Wittgenstein hated the music of Gustav Mahler. One cannot avoid his abusive remarks on the composer, as he says that "obviously it took a string of very rare talents to produce this bad music" and ponders caustically whether Mahler should have burnt his symphonies or else should have done himself violence so he would not write them at all.[1] Yet one ought not to dismiss Mahler too easily as merely another symptom, alien and uncongenial in Wittgenstein's eyes, of cultural decline, of the disintegration of the resemblances which unify a culture's way of life. Wittgenstein may have disliked Mahler's music, but disliking may still leave open the question about, and the need to come to terms with, one's urge to misunderstand, something that Stanley Cavell repeatedly flagged as a site for philosophy.

Indeed, Mahler was a genuine problem for Wittgenstein, a limiting case among composers, and that had to do very much with Wittgenstein's own relation to his times, with the specificity of his, and Mahler's, situatedness in *Zeit der Unkultur*, an age without culture. There was something important to understand about Mahler's music for sure, something that one ought to see, but the age without culture bestows itself upon us as a condition of myopia. For how could Mahler make sense of realizing his own otherness? "Should he have written [his symphonies] and realized that they were worthless?" asked Wittgenstein — "But how could he have realized that?"[2] It was the urge to come to terms with the specific sort of myopia pertaining to Mahler that made Mahler philosophically important for Wittgenstein.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 76.
2. Ibid., 76.

Among the notable readers of Wittgenstein, Cavell was perhaps the only one who observed the importance of Wittgenstein's grappling with this condition of myopia pertaining to Mahler. In his essay "A Scale of Eternity,"[3] Cavell probes into what he dubbed Mahler's "Cassandra-like fate" — being blessed with a perfect capacity for telling or expressing the truth and cursed with the fate of forever being misunderstood — in relation to Wittgenstein's predicament (in his own eyes) as a philosopher in an age without culture. Cavell observes that both Mahler and Wittgenstein were concerned with the maddening and distortion of life, a concern which gives rise to a yearning to hear the music in human life and in language. Both exhibit the kind of fear of inexpressiveness or suffocation, and a twin fear of uncontrollable expressiveness and exposure, which are fundamental to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

I propose to take a closer look at this nexus of ideas, which portrays Mahler (reasonably, I contend) as a sort of musical alter-ego for Wittgenstein. In the following discussion, my aim is to establish the following claims. First, Wittgenstein's little studied middle-period diary entries on modern and future music lend support to Cavell's intuition about Mahler's otherness vis-à-vis Wittgenstein. I will argue that, for Wittgenstein, Mahler's music did not fit any of the 'commonplace' absurdities of musical decline. Secondly, Cavell's observation is augmented by his reading (contra Georg Henrik von Wright) of Wittgenstein's diurnalized Spenglerian view of cultural decline. I will argue that, from Cavell's perspective, Mahler's unique promise as a composer may be portrayed as being endowed with the uncanny ability to pronounce the absurd truth of the normal, internal death of high culture music in the West. Thirdly, Wittgenstein's frustration with Mahler had little to do with the simplistic point that he did not care for his music, and everything to do with Mahler's failure (in Wittgenstein's eyes) to capture an artistic after-image of the breakdown of similarities that unify our form of life. I will argue that from Cavell's point of view, this amounts to a failure to revolt against cultural decline by embracing it — a failure Wittgenstein feared he shared with Mahler.

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3. Cavell, "A Scale of Eternity," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 279-85.

Wittgenstein's attitude toward Mahler shows a duality, which, in its general form, is quite typical of his Viennese upbringing.[4] For the Viennese elite, Mahler embodied an irresoluble conflict between his social role as a conductor, a guardian of *high culture* musical tradition, for which he was generally revered, and his quest as a modern composer to give voice to his situatedness in a history of music, which may have reached the limits of its own history. As a composer, Mahler was often lambasted by audience and critics alike for creating music which is both vulgar in its soundscape and irreverent with respect to the requirements of traditional symphonic structure. This conflict took on a particularly acute shape when Mahler's conducting seemed to have succumbed to his composer's whims, investing the structure of the music he performed with so much attention to detail and complexity to the point that its basic design diminished. On occasions Mahler even gave himself artistic license to retouch and reorchestrate Beethoven scores as befits modern times. This eventually resulted in a great scandal in the Vienna Philharmonic, which drove him to resign in 1901 from his position as conductor of the orchestra.

Against this backdrop, it is instructive to lend an ear to nuances in Wittgenstein's responses to Mahler. Wittgenstein's remarks on Mahler's excellence as a conductor may strike a familiar tone, but, interestingly, they concern not so much his prowess in interpreting the works of the great masters of the past, as his rapport with his players, his ability to communicate, to mutually tune-in, to open up anew a field of possibilities for characterizing. When Mahler was not on the podium, says Wittgenstein, the orchestra would collapse, not being able to keep on working on a level which was perhaps not natural to them.[5] But when he was there, he was unsurpassed in this ability to allow his players to make contact with one another in the playing. For Wittgenstein, that was a mark of the human excellence of one whose expertise lies in knowing human beings.[6] Wittgenstein wrote to Ben Richards about

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4. See Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), ch. 11.
5. See Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 43.
6. A proficient knower of human beings is endowed with a sensibility to the physiognomy of the human; capacities to perceive and judge the nature, moods, dispositions, and states of mind of other human beings, which to a certain extent we can teach one another. See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 239-40, §355-61, and my discussion in "Musicking as Knowing Human Beings," in *Intercultural Understanding After Wittgenstein*, ed. Carla Carmona, David Perez-Chico, and Chon Tejedor (London: Anthem, 2023), 77-91.

Mahler: "Normally, of course, one couldn't from the gestures of a conductor say much about him, but in this particular case, if you look at those wonderful movements you can see what an extraordinary man this was!"[7]

We need to bear in mind that Wittgenstein's philosophical thinking about music was largely shaped and regulated throughout his career by the master simile of language as music.[8] The simile brings to the fore all that is fluid, non-mechanical, embedded in ways of life, incalculable and indeterminate in language, first and foremost gesture and expression. It afforded Wittgenstein a spring of powerful analogies, images, and after-images for his career-long philosophical exploration of meaning and understanding, and most pertinently, the communicability of aspects. For him, there was no point in thinking about music without specific characterization, no point in thinking about musical sound apart from its embeddedness in a specific human gesture and its many elaborations in thought, speech and feeling, that is, apart from what Wittgenstein considered to be the preconditions, the lived, embodied realities, of musical intelligibility. Cavell underscored the importance of the master simile of language as music for Wittgenstein by speaking of the philosophical promise of "understanding without meanings" as "a particular form of communication, of revelation, one in which the demand for expression is put to the test (a matter that should open up anew, as in Wittgenstein's work, the concept of expression). To say that music puts expression to the test is to ask wherein lies my conviction in my own understanding if I cannot justify it to others (which is not the same as convincing others)."[9]

For Wittgenstein, Mahler certainly put expression to the test. And he did so at a time in the history of the West, when "general tendency of this age is to take away possibilities of expression: which is characteristic of age without a culture."[10] For Wittgenstein, culture at its height enables different people at different times and places to pool their cultural efforts and make use of their tasteful and creative powers

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7. Wittgenstein and Ben Richards, *"I think of you constantly with love…": Briefwechsel Ludwig Wittgenstein – Ben Richards 1946-1951*, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Innsbruck: Haymon, 2023), 134 (underlined in original).
8. I discuss this extensively in my new book. See Guter, *Wittgenstein on Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).
9. Cavell, *Here and There,* 254.
10. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein: Lectures, Cambridge 1930-1933, From the Notes of G. E. Moore*, ed. David Stern, Brian Rogers, and Gabriel Citron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2016), 5:2. The reference is to the original pagination in G. E. Moore's notes.

in a common spiritual bond.[11] An age without culture shows itself in the disintegration of culture into a host of disjointed efforts and non-discriminating judgments. It is a breakdown of the cohesive forces formerly embodied both in the observance of a shared tradition and in the attempt to work in a common spirit. A disintegration of the similarities that would unite a culture's way of life by enabling human beings to express and experience something exalted or even sacred. Wittgenstein maintained that this breakdown is shown in the disappearance of the arts as we have known them in the time of "Great Culture," as "genuine and strong characters [*Naturen*] simply turn away from the field of the arts" in pursuit of endeavors which are reducible to matters of skill and method.[12] Wittgenstein said:

> To some degree a house can be determined by calculation, but calculation leaves a certain margin, which architect fills in by sense of beauty etc. In case of bicycle or locomotive there is hardly any room for personal freedom: & so there might be with a house. In that case there would be no more architects. In some cases there is no room for expression of personality — none for nimbus. The moment a method is found, one way of expressing personality is lost.[13]

Wittgenstein's grasp of the condition of modernity as loss of "nimbus" sets the stage for his analysis of the variety of manifestations of myopia pertaining to the modern music of his time, which he approached, as he candidly admitted, "with the greatest mistrust (without understanding its language)."[14] In a rarely discussed remark from 1931, Wittgenstein offered what I maintain is a surprisingly nuanced philosophical outlook on the modern music of his time and the vagaries of not understanding its language.[15] The passage opens with a pronouncement of "nimbus" in cultural times,

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11. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 8-9.
12. Ibid., 8.
13. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein*, 5:2.
14. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 8.
15. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought: Diaries, 1930-1932, 1936-1937," in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 67-69. I rely here on my own translation of this remark, which preserves what I take as crucial semiotic ambiguities in Wittgenstein's original German. See my full translation and my discussion of this passage in Guter, "The Good, the Bad, and the Vacuous: Wittgenstein on Modern and Future Musics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 4 (2015): 425-39.

saying that the music of all cultural periods always appropriates certain maxims of the good and the right of its own time. In a sense, this is a *logos* within cultural relativity, that is, what human beings have in common within different cultures: they possess a basic common human spiritual nature, which they manifest differently through different cultures. Wittgenstein repeats one of his favorite examples: in Western late Nineteenth-Century high-culture this is how we recognize the principles of Swiss poet Gotfried Keller in the music of German composer Johannes Brahms.[16] It is an illuminating comparison for us as members of this culture — one that yields ways to see further likenesses and differences, and ways to go on discussing and drawing out from the articulation further aspects of what is characterized that are there to be seen in and by means of it — because within a culture human beings share a common spiritual nature that enables them both to partake in culture and to express themselves in a singular cultural way. This is precisely what we lose sight of in an age without culture when character is reduced to intellect and expression of personality gives way to scientific methods. And for that reason, according to Wittgenstein, the very idea of having "good" (that is real, natural, singular, and authentic) modern music is absurd. Such music would inevitably embody a philosophical paradox, for it needs to cohere with the disintegration of the resemblances which unify a culture's way of life and allow for the aesthetic feat of illuminating comparisons.

For Wittgenstein, the transition to the modern shows itself in some sort of constraint on our ability to conceptualize that very transition. Acknowledging the transition "doesn't mean that progress has occurred; but that style of thinking has changed."[17] The very notion of 'progress' evinces obfuscation, as Wittgenstein reminds us by means of the quote from Nestroy, which serves as a moto for the *Philosophical Investigations*: "The trouble about progress is that it always looks much greater than it really is."[18] Wittgenstein's point is that there is something, for sure, to be grasped and expressed amid cultural decline, but we are not astute enough to pronounce new ideals amid the breakdown of ideals. We have become constrained

16. See Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyrill Barrett (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), IV:32, n.
17. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein*, 5:2.
18. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, xxvii.

by the incommensurability that obtains between us and the past, and hence run up against a paradox: even if we knew "the truth," we probably would not be able to grasp or convey it. Wittgenstein's assertion that "the truth would sound entirely paradoxical to all people" immediately suggests Spengler's similar worry that the philosophers of his present day did not have a real standing in actual life, that they had not acquired the necessary reflective understanding of the time or its many built-in limitations, which philosophizing in the time of civilization requires.[19] This prompts Wittgenstein to suggest a bifurcation between two sub-types of the absurd, hence also between two kinds of myopia pertaining to modern music, which corresponds to a familiar distinction between progressive romantics and classicist epigones among early modern composers as found both in Spengler's writings and in the music theory of Spengler's Viennese ideological comrade-in-arms, Heinrich Schenker.[20]

One kind of absurd, Wittgenstein suggested, is music that "corresponds to any of the maxims that are articulated today."[21] Presumably, all such maxims are derived from the idea of progress. "Our civilization is characterized by the word progress," Wittgenstein maintained, "Progress is its form, it is not one of its properties that it makes progress."[22] The form of progress prescribes compulsive over-structuring and obfuscation, and with it, a fragmentation into calculable objects. Its typical activity is "to construct a more and more complicated structure."[23] The tendency is to render progress as something that transcends epochs, not just a certain "style of thinking." Thus, the adherence to progress reflects a constraint on seeing that we do not comprehend. For that reason, Wittgenstein calls the kind of music which adheres to progress "nonsensical" (*unsinnig*). To this category belong composers such as Richard Strauss and Max Reger, whose music, Spengler averred, is "a faked music,

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19. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 69-67. See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 1: Form and Actuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), 42.
20. Wittgenstein became acquainted around that time with the music theory of Schenker through conversations with musicologist Felix Salzer (Wittgenstein's nephew), who studied with Schenker in Vienna from 1931 until the latter's death in 1935. For a survey of the affinity between Spengler's and Schenker's worldviews, see Byron Almén, "Prophets of the Decline: The Worldviews of Heinrich Schenker and Oswald Spengler," *Indiana Theory Review* 17 (1996): 1-24. For a discussion of the textual evidence for Wittgenstein's familiarity with Schenker's music theory, see Guter, "The Good, the Bad, and the Vacuous."
21. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 67-69.
22. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 9.
23. Ibid.

filled with the artificial noisiness of massed instruments."[24] For Schenker, such romantic progressive composers had no other choice but to try masking the primitive design of their music with heavy orchestration, with noise and polyphonic clatter, and often to resort to vulgar, extra-musical narratives to solve problems of musical continuity. For Wittgenstein, as for Spengler and Schenker, such socially engaging, nonsensically absurd modern music was nothing but "rubbish."[25]

The other kind of absurdity in modern music corresponds to a downright negation of the form of progress, which, for Wittgenstein (as well as for Spengler and Schenker), was as emblematic of cultural decline as embracing the form of progress. If the latter reflects a constraint on seeing *that* we do not comprehend, the former reflects perhaps an even more frustrating constraint on seeing *what* we do not comprehend, on seeing through. "The composer who feels this within him," Wittgenstein wrote, "must confront with this feeling everything that is [now] articulated and therefore [his music] must appear by the present standards absurd, timid [*blödsinnig*]. But not engagingly absurd (for after all, this is basically what corresponds to the present attitude) but vacuous [*nichtssagend*]."[26] To the category of such vacuously absurd modern music belong classicist epigones, who continued to produce musical imitations in the style of Brahms well into the Twentieth-Century. Spengler contended that when a culture enters its final phases, artists simply work with the hollow forms of the old culture, without understanding its essence. Similarly, Wittgenstein believed that ideas could become worn out in time, no longer usable, and in this context, he commented: "I once heard Labor make a similar remark about musical ideas."[27] Strikingly, the single composer he names in regarding the category of vacuously absurd modern music is Josef Labor, who was a protégé of the Wittgenstein family and music teacher for Ludwig's siblings.[28]

Returning to the case of Mahler, it is eminently clear that Mahler's music does not sit well in any of these two categories, both from a purely historical-musicological perspective, and, even more striking, from Wittgenstein's own perspective as evinced by his remarks on Mahler. It goes without saying that Mahler's music cannot belong

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24. Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Vol. 1*, 194.
25. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 67-69.
26. Ibid., 69. Translation modified.
27. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 24.
28. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 69.

together with Labor's in the category of vacuously absurd modern music. Mahler was anything but a classicist epigone. However, Mahler was also not progressive like Richard Strauss, whose music Wittgenstein despised so deeply that he would not even enter the concert hall when it was played.[29] According to Morgan,[30] as advanced modern composers both Strauss and Mahler were compelled to respond to the atmosphere of crisis brought on by the progressive deterioration of the pitch and rhythmic conventions of "common-practice" tonality, in particular to the neutralization of musical materials, the leveling out and increasing interchangeability of all musical statements, which was a result of the rampant hyper-chromaticism and concomitant tonal decentralization of musical language at the beginning of the Twentieth-Century. But they responded to this challenge in very different ways. Whereas Strauss opted to develop an ever more exaggerated range of musical gestures, which strained the already weakened foundation of tonal music to its breaking point, Mahler "approached the problem from an entirely different direction. As if realizing that Western music history [...] had reached the limits of its own history — had become, that is to say, incapable of continuing to generate consistently progressive evolution – [he] fashioned a new type of music based on older and simpler models largely neglected by the main tradition."[31] Thus, Mahler's highly advanced music seemed strangely outmoded and historically regressive — he was neither brashly progressive like Strauss nor a lackluster conservative like Labor. Indeed, as Wittgenstein observed about Mahler, "you would need to know a good deal about music, its history and development, to understand him."[32]

It is instructive to set Wittgenstein remarks on Mahler's music against the customary critique, which was lashed out at Mahler at the time. Contemporary critics and the public often judged Mahler's symphonies to be both blatantly vulgar or 'lowlife' in substance and disorderly in form. These two aspects are interrelated. Mahler's response to modernity capitalized on introducing musical materials as if from the world of everyday life, the soundscape (real or reimagined) of the common

29. Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig, 1889-1921* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 124.
30. Robert P. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler: Mutual Responses at the End of an Era," *19th-Century-Music* 2, no. 1 (1978): 72-81.
31. Ibid., 75.
32. John King, "Recollections of Wittgenstein," in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 71.

people, which, unaccommodated to the requirements of traditional symphonic structure, disrupt the pristine purity and autonomy of the revered classical order. In Mahler's music, Morgan explains, "folk and popular elements are no longer neutralized, as in earlier composers, but appear undisguised — in their own clothing, as it were. The sense of intrusion from a foreign musical realm becomes an essential component of the compositional statement, and reflects a radically new conception of the nature and limits of serious musical language."[33] Wittgenstein clearly acknowledged the formal deviancy in Mahler's music. He disapprovingly noted that there was something initially incorrect in the architecture of Mahler's music.[34] Yet I take it as a remarkable fact that he said absolutely nothing against the most characteristic, and the most publicly deplored feature of Mahler's musical language: its activation of the vernacular. Instead, Wittgenstein put his finger on something much deeper concerning Mahler's musical language, which troubled him philosophically: the defamiliarization of simplicity. Defiantly opposed to progressive modern composers, who drew on the chromatic saturation of the tonal field, Mahler's modernism retained tonality in the strict, functional sense as an active force. As Morgan points out, it is by means of that very retention of tonality that its transformed historical meaning is reflected in Mahler's music in such a remarkably pointed way.[35] Wittgenstein seems acutely aware of this subtle point as he echoes the standard Viennese charge against Mahler concerning banality: "When for a change the later ones of the great composers write in simple harmonic relations [alternative: progressions], they are showing allegiance to their ancestral mother. Especially in these moments (where the others are most moving) Mahler seems especially unbearable to me & I always want to say then: but you have only heard this from the others, that isn't (really) yours."[36]

The poignancy of Wittgenstein's observation is even more evident when we contextualize it by means of Cavell's interpretation of Spengler's influence on

33. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler," 74.
34. Wittgenstein told this to G. H. von Wright. See Guter, "'A small, shabby crystal, yet a crystal': A Life of Music in Wittgenstein's *Denkbewegungen*," in *Wittgenstein's Denkbewegungen. Diaries 1930-1932/1936-1937: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Ilse Somavilla, Bożena Sieradzka-Baziur, and Carl Hamphries (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2019), 103, n. 136.
35. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler," 73-74.
36. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 93.

Wittgenstein.[37] At the core of Cavell's interpretation there is a basic agreement with Von Wright's contention that under the influence of Spengler, Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy became intimately allied to a way of viewing contemporary civilization and that this intimate connection is shown in the way in which *Philosophical Investigations* expresses a sense of its own time.[38] Yet Cavell sharply disagreed with Von Wright about the character of Wittgenstein's emulation of Spengler's point of view on cultural decline, especially pertaining to Cavell's understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophical project.[39] Whereas Von Wright opted to view cultural decline in terms of an abnormal cancerous condition that has invaded our ways of life, Cavell rejected this image of a cultural malignancy, underscoring the stubborn normalcy or everydayness of cultural decline, nothing that "Spengler's 'decline' is about the normal, say the internal, death and life of cultures."[40] According to Cavell,

> Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* diurnalizes Spengler's vision of the destiny toward exhausted forms, toward nomadism, toward the loss of culture, or say of home, or say community; he depicts our everyday encounters with philosophy, [...] wherein the ancient task of philosophy, to awaken us, or say bring us to our senses, takes the form of returning us to the everyday, the ordinary, every day, diurnally.[41]

Cavell's emphasis on the normalcy and mundanity of Spengler's notion of exhausted forms not only affords a way of framing Mahler's otherness as a modern composer in Wittgenstein's ears, but also allows an appraisal of the question, which was so important for Wittgenstein, concerning Mahler's authenticity as a composer in, or better — *for* an age without culture. Therein, I shall argue, lies another sense of

37. See Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).
38. See Georg Henrik von Wright, "Ludwig Wittgenstein in Relation to his Times," in *Wittgenstein and his Times*, ed. Brian F. McGuinness (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).
39. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
40. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 336.
41. Ibid., 345.

myopia pertaining to the condition of modernity, which Cavell dubs "a Cassandra-like fate."[42]

According to Spengler, each culture has certain forms of expression, which are unique to that culture, and in which its artistic accomplishments manifest themselves. These forms of expression are commonly shared and understood by members of the culture. Through these forms, culture members communicate and share their perception of the world and characteristic responses to the world in a living way. Such forms of expression hold the members of the culture together as a unifying force, and the perspective of high culture is enshrined within these forms. Spengler contended that when cultures decline into civilizations these expressive forms become exhausted, depleted, overused and ultimately meaningless. The unified cultural perspective which they prescribe and impose dissipates. They lose their prominence and fascination, and even their accessibility and comprehensibility. As a result, great accomplishments, such as those which have been carried out within those forms of expression, are no longer possible. This is essentially the predicament of the composer of vacuous modern music, according to Wittgenstein.[43] The revolt of such a composer (someone like Josef Labor) against decline is timid, foolish in a sense, as his diminished creative power remains in the confines of rigidified forms of expression, evincing inability — which is also lack of courage, since the composer knowingly confines himself — to see through these decrepit confines onto the changing scale of humanity. It is for this reason, I suggest, that Wittgenstein says that such music is *nichtssagend*, vacuous – literally: saying nothing.

By contrast, Mahler's modernism is transgressive. Encountering those "simple harmonic progressions" — a token of cultural avowal of a musical "ancestral mother" — in Mahler's music evoked in Wittgenstein a sense of the uncanny. "That isn't (really) yours," Wittgenstein derided Mahler.[44] Indeed, the long stretches of "simple music" in Mahler's symphonies give rise to a kind of paradox due to what Morgan calls "a process of 'defamiliarization'," [45] as Mahler transforms the overly familiar or habitual — something we heard or may have heard before — distancing it so as to

42. Cavell, *Here and There*, 279-80.
43. See Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 67-69.
44. Ibid., 93.
45. Morgan, "Ives and Mahler," 76.

rekindle its expressive force. "What initially sounds familiar always ends up sounding very different from what we actually expected," Morgan maintains, "the paradox implicit in this conjunction supplies the crucial point: what seems strange and extraordinary on one level does so only because, on another, it is so familiar and ordinary."[46] Mahler's transgression epitomizes the profound change into civilization that is brought about by the exhaustion of form of expression, according to Spengler. As forms of expression become uninhabitable in the time of civilization, the perspective of individuals becomes externalized with respect to those forms. Spengler wrote:

> Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture [...]. Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion [...]. death following life, rigidity following expansion, petrifying world city following mother-earth. They are [...] irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again [...] a progressive exhaustion of forms [...]. This is a very great stride toward the inorganic.[47]

Mahler's defamiliarization of the ordinary may very well be seen as approximating a full-fledged manifestation of such externalized perspective, hence the most philosophically challenging artistic embodiment of an age without culture, complete with a revolutionary new way of conceptualizing the standing of a musical work within a newly forming scale of humanity — what a musical composition is, how it relates to the surrounding world, the types of material appropriate to it, and the way these materials are to be combined and organized.

Wittgenstein was acutely aware of Mahler's transgressive new art and its connection with Spengler's view. "A picture of a complete apple tree, however accurate, in a certain sense resembles it infinitely less than does a smallest daisy," Wittgenstein wrote in 1931, "and in this sense a symphony by Brucker is infinitely more closely related to a symphony from the heroic period than is one by Mahler. If the latter is a work of art it is one of a *totally* different sort. (But this observation itself

46. Ibid.
47. Spengler, *Decline of the West, Vol. 1*, 31.

is actually Spenglerian)."[48] In Wittgenstein's metaphor, compared to a symphony by one of the great masters of the past (the image here is of an organic, living form: a real apple tree), a Mahler symphony is a perfectly executed picture of a complete apple tree while a Bruckner symphony is a smallest daisy, yet real, a living thing. Clearly, for Wittgenstein, the resemblance of Mahler's music to the music of high-culture is deceptive. It may belong to an entirely new spiritual enterprise that embodies modern civilization. It is the musical equivalent of a *trompe l'oeil* picture, for its true appreciation requires understanding its quest for disorientation — that under certain circumstances it is supposed to replace or be mistaken for that which it resembles. Thus, it calls out for participating in games, which are far removed from those befitting the forms of expression of yore.

Here Cavell's philosophical extension of Spengler's view of cultural decline comes into play.[49] It allows us to appreciate the intimate connection, which is the heart of Cavell's essay "A Scale of Eternity," between Wittgenstein and Mahler as creative forces in an age without culture. According to Cavell, "what Wittgenstein means by speaking outside language games [...] is a kind of interpretation of, or a homologous form of, what Spengler means in picturing the decline of culture as a process of externalization."[50] From Cavell's perspective, the disorientations of human language and its philosophical misuses, which Wittgenstein traced and engaged so vividly in the *Philosophical Investigations*, "these moments as tracked by the struggle of philosophy with itself, with the losing and turning of one's way,"[51] give voice to the loss of home, the repudiation of inheritance, the replacement of shared modes of community expression by artificial ones, which are all symptomatic of the condition of modernity. Cavell wrote: "[T]he philosophical subject of the *Investigations*, the modern ego entangled in its expressions of desire (Wittgenstein speaks both of our urge to understand as well as of our equally pressing urge to misunderstand), is specifically characterized by Wittgenstein in its moments of torment, sickness,

48. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 17. I argue elsewhere (Guter, "The Good, the Bad, and the Vacuous") that Wittgenstein's way of comparing Mahler with Bruckner vis-à-vis the works of the great masters of the past is another evidence for Wittgenstein's exposure at the time to the music theory of Schenker.
49. See the comparative study of Spengler and Cavell in William James DeAngelis, *Ludwig Wittgenstein – A Cultural Point of View: Philosophy in the Darkness of this Time* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), ch. 4.
50. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 345.
51. Ibid., 344.

strangeness, self-destructiveness, perversity, suffocation, and lostness."[52] For Cavell, these are concepts that seem to be called for in his experience of Mahler.[53] But I would like to suggest further that they may also serve to unlock Wittgenstein's intriguing self-directed, agonized remarks on Mahler.

According to Cavell, the diagnosis of becoming disoriented and lost in the world in speaking outside language games gives way to resistance in Wittgenstein's writings. It is a call to arms, taking over philosophy's ancient task to awaken us, to bring us to our senses, by means of reorienting us "to the everyday, the ordinary, every day, diurnally."[54] "It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein's practice," Cavell contends, "if we translate the idea of bringing words back as leading them back, shepherding them: which suggests not only that we have to find them, to go to where they have wandered, but that they will return only if we attract and command them, which will require listening to them."[55] Clearly, according to Cavell, the crucial task that Wittgenstein conjured for his new way of philosophizing was to find ways to tune-in on the words that got away and so to rein them in once again. This would be the genuine revolt against cultural decline, as opposed to simply negating it, thereby becoming unable to see through it — as in the case of vacuous modern composers – or to embracing the fake form of progress, thereby becoming unable to see the decline at all — as in the case of nonsensical modern composers. For Wittgenstein, the question then becomes all the more focused with respect to Mahler: Did he rise to the occasion? Could he have risen to the occasion?

Seen in this context, Wittgenstein's double-edged remarks on Mahler bring out not so much his aversion to Mahler's new form of musical art as his debilitating fear that he was plagued with the same type of myopia, which prevented Mahler, who may have gone further than any other composer of his generation to where the sounds have wandered, from returning and commanding them. In Wittgenstein's mind there was an intimate link between the puzzle of Mahler as a modern composer and his grappling with his own predicament as a philosopher in an age without culture. These remarks, written over a time span of some seventeen years, feature a remarkable

52. Cavell, *Here and There*, 267.
53. Ibid., 282.
54. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 345.
55. Ibid., 324.

consistency of tone and substance, thereby showing that this very personal, acute struggle with his musical alter ego was in fact never resolved.

Wittgenstein contended that Mahler failed to be authentic, which, for Wittgenstein, is immediately a failure of character. As Lurie points out, for Wittgenstein the notions of character and culture were bound together: "real, concrete human life emerges only within a culture, and as an expression of character."[56] This is something Wittgenstein carried over from his reading of Schopenhauer and Weininger concerning the relation between such notions as genius, character, and talent, and it was reinforced by reading Spengler.[57] Following a central theme of the Romantic movement, Wittgenstein maintained that human beings are set apart from one another by their different natures (character), just as human societies are set apart from one another by their different natures (culture). The term *character* designates a feature of human life through which singular and authentic human lives manifest themselves. This unique aspect of human nature "is manifested in the emotions, imagination, personal attitudes, and aesthetics sensibilities from which a person's actions ensue in a natural and uninhibited fashion."[58]

The terms "character" and "culture" are both contrasted with the notion of "intellect," which designates something which is a product of logic, commonly possessed by all human beings — to wit, the ability to think abstractly and to acquire scientific knowledge. Intellect is a feature of human life, which cuts across individuals and cultures, and does not distinguish any of these in particular. Since the notion of human life emerges through intellect as a mere abstract generalization, for Spengler, intellect may serve at most as a basis for the emergence of human life in what he dubs "civilization," not culture. The contrivance, abstraction, imitativeness, and artificiality of civilization marks the loss of "nimbus," which Wittgenstein speaks about, as character ("expression of personality") tends to be reduced to intellect ("method") in the age without culture.[59] Hence, we witness also the disappearance of "strong and genuine characters" from the arts,[60] whereas the arts, at their greatest moment, were

56. Yuval Lurie, *Wittgenstein on the Human Spirit* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 47.
57. In 1931, Wittgenstein included Schopenhauer, Weininger and Spengler in a list he made of ten thinkers who influenced him the most. See Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 16.
58. Lurie, *Wittgenstein on the Human Spirit*, 47.
59. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein*, 5:2.
60. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 8.

supposed to enable the clearest, most pronounced manifestation of character. Indeed, for Wittgenstein (clearly under the influence of Schopenhauer, Weininger and Spengler), "the measure of genius is character, — even if character on its own does *not* amount to genius. Genius is not 'talent *and* character', but character manifesting itself in the form of a special talent."[61] Being authentic in this sense requires courage. Hence, "one might say: 'Genius is courage in one's talent',"[62] and "to the extent there is courage, there is connection with life & death."[63]

In a passage written in 1937, Wittgenstein described the form of myopia of modernity pertaining to Mahler (and alarmingly, also to himself) as a failure of character: self-deception due to a lack of courage. The fact that he wrote this passage in code speaks volumes about its personal sensitivity. Wittgenstein wrote:

> Lying to oneself about oneself, lying to oneself about one's own inauthenticity, must have a bad effect on one's style, for the consequence will be that one is unable to distinguish what is genuine and what is false. This is how the inauthenticity of Mahler's style may be explained and I am in the same danger. If one is putting up a show to oneself, this must express itself in the style. The style cannot be one's own. Whoever is unwilling to know himself is writing a kind of deceit. Whoever is unwilling to plunge into himself, because it is too painful, naturally remains with his writing on the surface. (Whoever wants only the next best thing, can achieve only the surrogate of a good thing).[64]

Wittgenstein connects the accusation concerning inauthenticity explicitly with the concept of style as a mode of expression. Importantly, this accords with Cavell's internalist way of reading Wittgenstein, which takes it for granted that Wittgenstein's style of writing is an essential part of his philosophical method, and that his method and style are internally related.[65]

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61. Ibid., 40.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 44.
64. Wittgenstein, "MS 120," *Wittgenstein Source*, ed. Alois Pichler and Joseph Wang, accessed December 27, 2023, http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/BTE/Ms-120,72v[1]et73r[1]_n (my translation).
65. For further considerations of style and method in Wittgenstein in connection to music, see Guter and Inbal Guter, "Thinking Through Music: Wittgenstein's Use of Musical Notation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 81, no. 3 (2023): 248-62.

For Wittgenstein, a style connoted a deep sense of urgency and commitment in one's life, but also a pattern of human life. "Style is the expression of a general human necessity," Wittgenstein wrote, "This holds for a writing style or a building style (and any other). Style is general necessity viewed sub specie aeterni."[66] Wittgenstein understood the concept of style in terms of fittingness and attunement: "Writing the right style means, setting the carriage straight on the rails."[67] Owning a style, giving voice to one's movement of thought, became an acute, disquieting philosophical challenge for Wittgenstein in the aftermath of the *Tractatus* and well into his later years.[68] "[Being] in love with my sort of movement of thought in philosophy," he confessed, "does not mean [...] that I am in love with my style. That I am not."[69] As late as 1947 Wittgenstein still found it necessary to note his reservations about restoring or performing an old style afresh in a new language, as if it would speak in a manner that may suit current times. He associated such reproductive flattery with his own onetime attempt in modern architecture.[70] He averred:

> What I mean is *not* however giving an old style a new trim. You don't take the old forms & fix them up to suit today's taste. No, you are really speaking, maybe unconsciously, the old language, but speaking it in a manner that belongs to the newer world, though not on that account necessarily one that is to its taste.[71]

Yet for Wittgenstein this challenge was marred and hindered by the kind of myopia that he feared he shared with Mahler: they both might be positioned in such a way as to be incapable of distinguishing between what is genuine and what is false. This self-deception is portrayed in the 1937 coded passage as a lack of courage to know oneself, an acknowledgment of a weakness of character that leads to an inability to manifest

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66. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 37. There is an allusion here to Spengler's inflated contention that style is the revelation of something metaphysical, a mysterious necessity, a fate.
67. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 44.
68. See Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 39. Wittgenstein regarded the *Tractatus* as containing "kitsch," that is, "passages with which I filled in the gaps and so-to-speak in my own style." He admitted that it is now difficult to evaluate how much of that book is filled with such "kitsch."
69. Ibid., 109.
70. Between the years 1926-1928 Wittgenstein designed and built (together with Paul Engelmann) a house for his sister, Margaret Stonborough, at 19 Kundmanngasse, Vienna.
71. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 69.

true genius, that is, authentic creativity in, and for an age without culture. Cavell offered an image for this personal crisis: "a Cassandra-like fate," that is, being blessed with a perfect capacity for telling or expressing the truth and cursed with the fate of forever being misunderstood.[72] In the singular diary passage on the vagaries of authentic, that is, truthful modern music, which I discussed above, Wittgenstein could not be clearer about this predicament: "This sentence is not easy to understand but it is so: Today no one is clever enough to formulate what is right. [...] The truth would sound completely paradoxical to everyone."[73] Yet the point, which I wish to draw from Cavell's suggestion, is that just like Cassandra's fate, Wittgenstein's and Mahler's joint fate as creative forces in an age without culture is tragically self-induced. There is nothing Godly or otherwise transcendent about it. The *crime* and its *punishment* are both to be found within the scale of humanity.

Wittgenstein's remarks further suggest that Cassandra is perhaps not the only relevant image conjured by his acute realization of his failure. In the context of Wittgenstein's quest for, and difficulty with owning a genuine style of philosophizing, the curse of being misunderstood make look also, as McGuinness suggested, like the fate written books in Plato's *Phaedrus*: "[Wittgenstein's] aim was always to stimulate a new way of thinking, and so, by the kind of bind that occurs in various forms in his life, his task could never be complete, never reside in a written book."[74] Admitting that he was in love with his own movement of thought but not with his own style, Wittgenstein added: "Perhaps, just as some like to hear themselves talk, I like to hear myself write?"[75] "My style is like a bad musical composition," Wittgenstein wrote a few years later.[76] This sense of solitude and uncertainty deepens in Wittgenstein's final remark on Mahler, which was penned in 1948, shortly before Wittgenstein's death, and with it arises another sense of the conjunction of self-deception and being misunderstood.[77]

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72. Cavell, *Here and There*, 279-80. Apollo, the sun-god, god of prophecy, music and poetry was attracted to Cassandra, daughter of Priam, King of Troy. In return for her favors, she asked from Apollo the gift of prophecy, which the god was glad to grant. But when Cassandra refused to give herself to him, Apollo, unable to withdraw his gift, made it useless to her by providing that those who heard her predictions would not believe them.
73. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 69.
74. Brian McGuinness, *Approaches to Wittgenstein: Collected Papers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 197.
75. Wittgenstein, "Movements of Thought," 109.
76. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 45.
77. Ibid., 76-77.

This is a fairly extensive passage, which palpably shows that Wittgenstein never got to the point of resolving the inner tensions that Mahler's persona and music had come to embody for him, and which pertained to his own style of philosophizing in an age without culture. Wittgenstein maintains that one cannot see oneself from within an overview, and therefore one can always (mistakenly) render one's otherness as some sort of excellence. Wittgenstein contends that "even someone who struggles against vanity, but not entirely successfully, will always deceive himself about the value of what he produces."[78] Ultimately, the problem afflicting Mahler as a composer, and Wittgenstein as a philosopher and writer, is a problem of incommensurability: "If today's circumstances are really so different, from what they once were, that you cannot compare your work with earlier works in respect of its genre, then you equally cannot compare its value with that of the other work."[79] And then he adds: "I myself am constantly making the mistake under discussion."[80]

Cavell offers the observation that this sort of incommensurability is inherent to the way Wittgenstein's philosophizing relates to the past, that is, it is inherent in Wittgenstein's writing to philosophy's self-encounter. He suggests:

> [I]f I think here of Wittgenstein's revolution, or kink, in philosophy, as letting the commonplace, or say the banal, break into the mood of philosophizing (as well, as is expected of philosophy from its beginning, demanding that philosophizing break into the spell of the commonplace), and recognize that in Wittgenstein these are two faces of philosophy attempting to recognize each other, then I feel I might turn to Mahler's works as contributions to thinking about philosophy's selfencounter.[81]

Then, Mahler's activation of the vernacular, which, as I noted above, Wittgenstein strikingly kept silent about, earmarks the joint fate of the two men, as Lurie suggests,[82] as something like the fate of Philoctetes, who, agonized after being bitten by a snake, was abandoned on an island by the Greek troops on their journey to Troy.

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78. Ibid., 77.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid.
81. Cavell, *Here and There*, 283-84.
82. See Lurie, *Wittgenstein on the Human Spirit*, 150.

Stranded on the island of philosophy's (and music's) self-encounter, the question always remains "whether the spiritual progression of our culture is still continuing (and it is us who are being left behind), or whether the culture has disappeared (and we are the only ones left to notice it)."[83]

Thus, for Wittgenstein, the most debilitating form of myopia pertaining to the modern condition is the loss of measure, as refracted by the threefold imagery of the fate of Cassandra, the fate of books in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and the fate of Philoctetes. As Cavell points out, Wittgenstein's relation to Mahler, indeed the very modernism of these two figures, is deeply rooted

> in the radicality of the doubt [concerning the value their work], the invention of or participation in a new term of criticism, that of worthlessness, a sense of personal failure in not reaching the greatness of one's enterprise, where greatness has lost its measure.[84]

This was undoubtedly an uneasy realization for Wittgenstein who, as Cavell noted, has set himself on a mission to combat decline by rectifying the maladies of philosophy with his own new interlocutory style of clarification. Yet it was this realization that gave rise in Wittgenstein to a yearning, which Cavell expounded in his reading of the *Investigations*, to hear the music in the scale of humanity — in human life and in language — realizing that expressive reciprocity is "a demand that music, perhaps first among the arts, shares with philosophy."[85]

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83. Ibid.
84. Cavell, *Here and There*, 281.
85. Ibid., 254.

IV. Cinema and Collection

8. Cavell and the Magic of Cinema

PIERGIORGIO DONATELLI

1. At the Origins of Cinema

The World Viewed is a fascinating, dense and enigmatic book by Stanley Cavell on the ontology of cinema, understood as a fact of experience that leads us back to our fundamental existential dimension as individuals displaced before the world that passes before our eyes.[1] The world viewed on the big screen in the dark movie theater is our world, but we are not in it, we are present to it by looking at it from the outside, we own it in this mythological way. This is the magic of film, according to Cavell: "How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen."[2] A magic that repays us for our loneliness and sadness by making them stand out against the background of the world seen on the screen, fabulous and mythical: "movies also promise us happiness exactly not because we are rich or beautiful or perfectly expressive, but because we can tolerate individuality, separateness, and inexpressiveness. In particular, because we can maintain a connection with reality despite our condemnation to viewing it in private."[3]

The connection with reality is achieved, as if by magic, in the experience of the transfiguration of our events and our earthly presence, which take on the sharp contours and the solid texture of the world on the screen, just as, when leaving the cinema (an experience that belongs more and more to the past), picking up the thread of ordinary occupations and thoughts seems strange and our daily dwelling is

1. William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's "The World Viewed": A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000). See also Rothman, *The Holiday in His Eye: Stanley Cavell's Vision of Film and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021).
2. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 40.
3. Ibid., 213.

transformed by the memories and impressions that are still in our eyes. As Wittgenstein remarked:

> When you come out of a movie onto the street, you sometimes have the experience of seeing the street and the people as if they were on the screen and part of the plot of a movie. How come? *How* does one see the street and the people? I can only say: I have the fleeting thought, for example, "Perhaps *this* man will be a main character in the plot." But that's not all there is to it. Somehow my attitude toward the street and the people is like the one toward the action on the screen. Perhaps something like mild curiosity, or enjoyment. – But initially I can't even say all that.[4]

That which confines us where we are, all that which is unexpressed and unreached, the melancholic contingency and finitude of our lives, is transfigured by the world viewed on the screen, which penetrates into our own. This is the promise of happiness that cinema holds for us.

Cinema arrives with its magic at the moment when all the great arts, from painting to the novel to theater, are in their modernist phase, questioning the power to possess the world through their work, on the canvas, in the fabric of narrative, in theatrical performance. They question the realism of art, the power to recreate the world and make it inhabitable. This theme offers the enigmatic thread of Cavell's thoughts in *The World Viewed*.[5] In experiencing the loss of the creative power discovered by Romanticism, modernism unmasks the fables of the arts, as Nietzsche had already done in *Human, All Too Human*, criticizing the trust he had placed in them in his earlier writings:

> It is not without profound sorrow that one admits to oneself that in their highest flights the artists of all ages have raised to heavenly transfiguration

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume 2*, ed. G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), §493.
5. I explored the difficult and enigmatic place of modernism in *The World Viewed* in my "Rethinking Modernism in Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*," in *The World Reviewed,* ed. Jeroen Gerrits (forthcoming). See also Daniel Morgan, "Modernist Investigations: A Reading of *The World Viewed*," *Discourse* 42, nos. 1-2 (2020): 209-40.

> precisely those conceptions which we now recognize as false: they are the glorifiers of the religious and philosophical errors of mankind, and they could not have been so without believing in the absolute truth of these errors. If belief in such truth declines in general, if the rainbow-colours at the extreme limits of human knowledge and supposition grow pale, that species of art can never flourish again which, like the *Divina Commedia*, the pictures of Raphael, the frescoes of Michelangelo, the Gothic cathedral, presupposes not only a cosmic but also a metaphysical significance in the objects of art.[6]

The arts, facing the challenge of modernism, are forced to return to the bare conditions of their activity, to the fact of space and color on the canvas, to linguistic form, word and sound. In philosophy, Wittgenstein follows a similar path when he returns to the power of words and gestures in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Having emptied the structure of the philosophical tradition and its theories, he returns to the primitive scenes of life, to the simple words taught to children in the quote from Augustine that opens the book, or, in section 2, to the words exchanged by builders who pass bricks, slabs and beams to each other, and this is the only language they use and the only life they lead. We cannot trust philosophical constructions because they no longer have the right to claim their theses and demand our understanding; the words they use are shrouded in a haze that makes clear vision impossible. The great problems of the philosophical tradition do not offer genuine issues, they must be dismantled to return to the rough ground where words are used in specific circumstances, motivated by interests woven into life. As Wittgenstein writes, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life."[7]

We must, however, summon the broader cultural scene that, between the two centuries and in the first decades of the twentieth century, challenged and unsettled the conventions of bourgeois life, revealed its tics and obsessions, as in Schnitzler's stories and Freud's clinical cases, and returned to the power of the body, to the fact of sexuality, which appears as an incomprehensible construction once we have

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6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102.
7. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §19.

challenged the bourgeois second nature that shapes it into feelings and virtues such as modesty and chastity. How romantic, out of time, and childlike Joachim and Ruzena seem to us in Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, the young Prussian Junker moved by a confused and immature need for order, and the entraîneuse he has wrested from the obscure profession, how strange and disturbing is the world of conventions and order, threatened on all sides by the intrusion of a new reality, represented by the crawling and threatening urban life of Berlin. This is how the two protagonists are seen by their worldly friend Bertrand:

> To him Joachim and Ruzena seemed creatures who lived only with a small fraction of their being in the time to which they belonged, the age to which their years entitled them; and the greater part of them was somewhere else, perhaps on another star or in another century, or perhaps simply in their childhood.[8]

For Hermann Broch, romanticism indicates a state of exile from the present world and of incommunicability; its power to bring human beings together has waned. We should also remember that these were the decades of the great sexual experiments transfigured in Witkiewicz's rutilant novels, and of the reversal of the perversions newly invented by psychiatry into their festive enactment, which would reach its zenith in the Berlin on which Nazi violence would soon descend.

Against this background of a crisis of conventions that forces a return to the constitutive facts of human existence, to the fact of language, to our earthly location, to the encounters of bodies and souls, Cavell brings in the classic Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, accompanied by a series of European films – which, as he notes, have earned the right to be considered acceptable in America as films, and not just as foreign films. Cinema appears on the scene as the last traditional art, although he points out that from its beginnings it also existed in a modernist state, as in revolutionary Russia, which he does not consider in the book. In the decades of modernism, cinema comes from another world. In fact, it was produced in Hollywood

8. Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers: A Trilogy*, ed. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Vintage International, 1996), 79-80.

in the same years that the great intellectuals of the German-speaking world, fleeing Nazism, emigrated to California, from Adorno to Brecht to the Manns, exiled from the great European culture. Cinema enters the scene innocent and unaware of the torments that grip the other arts and the whole of cultural production. Cavell plays magnificently and enigmatically with this contrast. When the other arts are in crisis, when culture and politics have lost the power to represent the world by returning it to us as a place we can inhabit and claim as our own, cinema offers us the world, establishing a natural relationship of trust with its audience, touched by the grace of projection on the screen and its storytelling.

2. Ontology and Criticism

Both aspects, the ontology of the world projected on the screen and the stories told in these films, are brought into focus in Cavell's book. The ontology that appears in the subtitle ("Reflections on the ontology of film") refers in the first place to the world viewed on the screen, to its projection in front of the viewers who watch it unseen.

> A screen is a barrier. What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds — that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me — that is, screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality.[9]

Playing with the word "screen," Cavell argues that the fundamental ontological fact is that the world I am present to is screened by the screen on which it is projected, making me invisible and screening its existence from me, so that this world and its audience are ontologically separate. Cavell also plays with temporality, since the world on the screen does not exist now, it is in the past, or it can convey a sense of the future, as Cavell argues in his remarks on the later set of films commenting on the appearance of color. We are not present to it, and it is not our present. Its temporality is different from ours, in which we can embrace the future situated in our present, make pacts and treaties

9. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24.

and promise to keep them, whereas on the screen time is "visually preserved in endless repetition, an eternal return, but thereby removed from the power to preserve us; in particular, powerless to bring us together."[10] That is why the human commonwealth is returned to us on the screen as a mythological fact. On the other hand, it is precisely the world of cinema, with its intense reality, that projects our existence into an unreal state. In the dark hall of the movie theater "we are displaced from our natural habitation within [the world], placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition."[11] The magic and transformative power of film lies in this relationship between the screen and its audience, between two worlds that speak to each other mythologically.

In our relationship to the screen, Cavell uncovers the skepticism that haunts our existence — not the intellectual problem (the arguments about the existence of other minds and the external world), but the existential question of whether our attunement to the world and to human community is grounded, the skepticism revealed in the vivid and unpleasant perception that the spontaneous agreement and sympathy (in Wittgenstein's expressions[12]) of words, gestures, and actions in the whirl of life can be broken at any moment: again in Broch's words, the

> uneasiness in which things imperceptibly moved out of their places and in which every social gathering, although it ought to have presented an integral aspect, began to disintegrate into something that was disconcertingly multifarious, something that somebody or other, by means of decorations, garlands and banner, had combined into an artificial unity, against his own better judgment. [...] the curse of the casual, of the fortuitous, that spreads itself over things and their relations to each other, making it impossible to think of any arrangement that would not be equally arbitrary and fortuitous.[13]

"Film is a moving image of skepticism," writes Cavell:[14] in satisfying our senses by taking a view of a reality that does not exist, exiled from our natural home, we come

10. Ibid., 214.
11. Ibid., 41.
12. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, II, §699.
13. Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*, 642-43.
14. Cavell, The World Viewed, 188.

to terms with our lack of knowledge about what grounds our trust in reality and others. This faith in the world and in human community returns to us as a secular mystery, a matter to be mastered by leading it back to the exercise of life instructed by cinema, when its power radiates in memories, in conversations, in the friendships it nurtures and in the rhythms of everyday life. Cinema explores the experience of skepticism that haunts our existence, revealing its different sides: isolation, acknowledgment and the creative dimension it opens. As Cavell writes:

> It was always part of the grain of film that, however studied the lines and set the business, the movement of the actors was essentially improvised – as in those everyday actions in which we walk through a new room or lift a cup in an unfamiliar locale or cross a street or greet a friend or look in a store window or accept an offered cigarette or add a thought to a conversation. They could all go one way or another. Our resources are given, but their application to each new crossroads is an improvisation of meaning, out of the present.[15]

Returning to our everyday life, filled with the memory of the scenes, the words exchanged, the gestures and the atmospheres — all that imbues the movement of the human body, the gaze and the gestures with a magical depth — our own actions and gestures are mobilized, their application to a new crossroads open and full of possibilities. It is in this mythological dimension, reflected in one's present reality, that we discover the power of cinema to intensify existence, to turn it away from the mechanical and predictable course of hours and days. The ontology of cinema provides us with the facts about our existence and the instructions for making it a mobile matter, where we can take turns that depend on us and our freedom. Under the title of ontology the dimension of an ethics and politics of cinema is revealed. Cavell develops it fully in his later writings on cinema, and in a rich and festive way in *Pursuits of Happiness* where he stages the couples of the remarriage comedies as miniature portraits of the political covenant that holds society together.[16]

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15. Ibid., 153.
16. See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981), 151.

I have described some aspects of the ontology of cinema. Ontology, however, cannot be examined without delving into the stories and characters of the films, into what is properly film criticism, while ontology offers a theory of cinema: "it is arguable that the only instruments that could provide data for a theory of film are the procedures of criticism."[17] Under the lens of criticism, we find the stories of these films, the depth and virtuosity of human conventions in which the facts of life, temporality, mortality, separateness and intimacy are woven. Cinema offers us the world in all its spontaneity and candor, which is precisely what modernist art declares it can no longer do, which is why it is forced to return to the power of the medium itself, to the canvas that shows itself in its physicality, to the words that strike us in the form of signs, to the sound that is composed into music. On the other hand, films naturally offer us a world that arouses our interest and emotions, and becomes the subject of conversation, and creates the kind of companionship represented by friends and strangers gathered in front of the big screen in a movie theater. It is the world projected and seen under such conditions that comes back to us as if by magic, as well as its stories, in which the same characters appear over and over again, the actors, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Katherine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Chaplin and Buster Keaton, etc., and the familiar types they embody, the reporter, the sergeant, the spy, the quack, the dance-hall hostess, the fallen woman, the sheriff, and so on. Cavell writes:

> After *The Maltese Falcon* we know a new star, only distantly a person. "Bogart" *means* "the figure created in a given set of films." His presence in those films is who he is, not merely in the sense in which a photograph of an event is that event; but in the sense that if those films did not exist, Bogart would not exist, the name "Bogart" would not mean what it does.[18]

Actors in classic Hollywood cinema are stars, they shine with an immense singularity and individuality, their own and that of the types they embody, which together create a world inhabited by these characters who return again and again in the world of these films:

17. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 12.
18. Ibid., 28.

> One recalls the lists of stars of every magnitude who have provided the movie camera with human subjects — individuals capable of filling its need for individualities, whose individualities in turn, whose inflections of demeanor and disposition were given full play in its projection. They provided, and still provide, staples for impersonators: one gesture or syllable of mood, two strides, or a passing mannerism was enough to single them out from all other creatures. They realized the myth of singularity.[19]

At a time when modernist art is no longer able to engage us in a world, and with it society is distancing itself from the conventions in which human individuality finds its expression, cinema magically offers us a world in which we naturally place our trust, populated by a myriad of diverse and subtle individualities that captivate us and convey the nuances and twists of our existences in this dramatic form.

3. The Modernism of *The World Viewed*

When Cavell writes *The World Viewed*, he expresses his surprise that such an art could have flourished apart from the problems and anxieties of modernism.

> If film is seriously to be thought of as an art at all, then it needs to be explained how it can have avoided the fate of modernism, which in practice means how it can have maintained its continuities of audiences and genres, how it can have been taken seriously without having assumed the burden of seriousness.[20]

Cinema naturally won the conviction and enchantment of its audience, captured it with its candor, free of intellectual seriousness and attitudes. There are only the captivating individualities of Katherine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwick, Cary Grant and Spencer Tracy, the types they embody, the words they speak with a conviction that cannot be questioned, preserved from skeptical doubt. This is the naturalness, the

19. Ibid., 35.
20. Ibid., 14-15.

candor, and the total frankness of the characters that populate classical cinema. The natural state of Hollywood is that of romanticism and the nineteenth-century transcendentalism of Thoreau and Emerson, their faith in words, in the instruments of labor, in the elements of nature, their trust in the human community and in the American Constitution (celebrated in the body of comedies that Cavell comments on in *Pursuit of Happiness*). It is from the standpoint of such faith that they test whether each word, action, and daily act of trust can be claimed from one's own point of view; if the government is unjust, I cannot recognize it as my government: "under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison," writes Thoreau.[21]

The task is to assess whether the spontaneous trust we place in what we have in common — in nature, in language, in human response, and in the choices of government — is well placed, whether we can claim that "common" as our common, or whether it is instead a particular that excludes us. In *The World Viewed*, transcendentalism is in the background. It will come to the fore later. In this book, it is European romanticism, literary and philosophical, that provides the framework (at one point Cavell mentions Kant, Hegel, Blake, and Wordsworth; and a century later Heidegger and Wittgenstein).[22] In romanticism, he finds the place of such an appeal to the common, to what gives gravity and verticality to our activities, the place where this appeal is at once confronted with the acknowledgment of what is shared as well as with the occasions of isolation, when we are forced into our privateness and the world is no longer our world, language does not provide us with the words to give voice to our secrets, and the choices of government make us outlaws.

It is not surprising, then, that Cavell reads both the romantic and the modernist problematic in the question of acknowledging a world that we are always on the verge of losing. This romanticism shares with modernism the goal of maintaining our conviction in reality. Modernism does this by returning to the power of the medium itself, while romanticism can rely on the tradition that has made the medium a trustworthy tool through which the artist can naturally express what she

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21. Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, ed. Tammy Roberts, Mical Moser, Don LePan, and Craig Lawson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2011), 47.
22. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 22.

wants to mean with her work, and which is equally naturally received by her audience. In his comparison with modernist painting to which he devotes an entire chapter, Cavell writes:

> The works of Pollock, Louis, Noland, and Olitski achieve in unforeseen paths an old wish of romanticism — to imitate not the *look* of nature, but its conditions, the possibilities of knowing nature at all and of locating ourselves in a world. For an old romanticist, these conditions would have presented themselves as nature's power of destruction or healing, or its fertility. For the work of the modernists I have in mind, the conditions present themselves as nature's autonomy, self-sufficiency, laws unto themselves. [...] This is not a return *to* nature but the return *of it,* as of the repressed. It is the release of nature from our private holds.[23]

Modernist painting returns the conditions of nature to us as our common possession, freed from the private hold to which we have subjected them, and it achieves this by making the conditions of nature emerge as a repressed fact, the fact of color and the spatial location of the work of art, thereby demanding the acknowledgement of our own conditions, our location in the world, our being in front of something in a certain position and direction, our total presence at a given time and place.

Modernism and romanticism share their aims, which are those of realism, but it is crucial for Cavell to separate classic Hollywood cinema from the modernist experience, which in this book is that of American abstract painting, except for the comparison with Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*, whom he considers the progenitor of the modernist store of cinematic obsessions, "Fashion, The Man of the World, Crowds, The Child, War-Sketches, Pomps and Ceremonies, The Military Man, The Dandy, Cosmetics, Women and Courtesans, Carriages."[24] The modernism of painting that Michael Fried examines is contrasted with Hollywood, but we could rather set up the contrast between Hollywood and Europe, which is also a contrast of social and historical experiences in the same decades, the 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, we have the United States going through the Great Depression, weaving

23. Ibid., 113-14.
24. Ibid., 43.

hopes and new solidarities: these are the themes that will be central to the examination of remarriage comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness*, where marriage represents the political covenant and crisis is the occasion to return to the terms of the agreement, personal of the couple and political of the nation, and democracy emerges precisely as the locus of this kind of conversation, where crises and skepticism are taken up again and again as occasions for assessing and transforming the terms of the mutual agreement. On the other side of the ocean is Europe, recovering from the Great War and radicalizing the sense of crisis and loss experienced with the thrill of dancing on the abyss before the rise of Nazism and the painful sense of a world at an end expressed by Wittgenstein in 1930:

> I realize then that the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value, but simply of certain means of expressing this value, yet the fact remains that I have no sympathy for the current of European civilization and do not understand its goals, if it has any. So I am really writing for friends who are scattered throughout the corners of the globe.[25]

By considering this contrast, we can explore the affinities, not explicitly mentioned by Cavell, between the romantic spontaneity and candor of Hollywood movies and European modernism — the latter being a relevant context of Wittgenstein's philosophy and the unifying motif of Cavell's first published book of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?* Such affinities might be described as follows.

The ontology of film tells us about the mythological condition in which cinema is revealed, which concerns the fact of the projection of the film, the world viewed on the screen, a world of pictures moving through time (pictures and temporality) that we witness by being present to a world that is past, in the sense that it is constitutively past because we are not part of it, its time passes without us; and it is also a world that has passed, it is complete without us and therefore finished, dead, or perhaps we are dead to this world, which we therefore inhabit, haunting it like ghosts. *The World Viewed* (in the first edition) concludes with the following paragraph:

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25. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6.

> A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality. This is an importance of film — and a danger. It takes my life as my haunting of the world, either because I left it unloved (the *Flying Dutchman*) or because I left unfinished business (*Hamlet*). So there is reason for me to want the camera to deny the coherence of the world, its coherence as past: to deny that the world is complete without me. But there is equal reason to want it affirmed that the world is coherent without me. That is essential to what I want of immortality: nature's survival of me. It will mean that the present judgment upon me is not yet the last.[26]

In the world viewed, complete without me, projected on the big screen, we find satisfaction for our desire for immortality and for our belief that the world (nature and society) is a grand enterprise that goes on without us, without our contribution; it responds to the need for relief and liberation from the burden of being chained to our responsibilities, to our individual role, to the destiny of being separate individuals, prisoners of the here and now. But it also urges rebellion against the prospect of our disappearance, and motivates the desire to devote all one's energy and the difference one can make to the things of the world with an exalted sense of self.

Another aspect is Cavell's description of the narrative form of film, the types that animate it, familiar figures and actors who return in various recurring situations. The typical exemplifies the mythical, Cavell writes, referring to Thomas Mann's essay, *Freud and the Future*. Mann comments on his discovery of the mythical in the series of novels that comprise *Joseph and His Brothers*, where, as he moves from the narration of bourgeois and individual events to the stories of the Bible, he encounters life lived mythically, individual existence embodying the great figures of the past, Cleopatra living as the embodiment of the myth of Aphrodite, Caesar "imitating" Alexander, and Napoleon lamenting that modern consciousness would not allow him to present himself as the son of Jupiter Ammon, as Alexander had done. Behind the gigantism of these historical figures, which seems at odds with our contemporary individual lives, lies a crucial aspect of the human condition. Thomas Mann writes:

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26. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 160.

> For man sets store by recognition, he likes to find the old in the new, the typical in the individual. From that recognition he draws a sense of the familiar in life, whereas if it painted itself as entirely new, singular in time and space, without any possibility of resting upon the known, it could only bewilder and alarm.[27]

In the typical we can perceive the individual and embody it in our existences: we model individuality by following the highest lesson offered by the examples we draw from the past, and in this way we can become exemplary for others. Moreover, by living the typical in one's own life, by giving form to our own character and recognizing it in others, we shift the temporality of life into the celebration of past figures and situations that return in the present conditions, locating ourselves in the mythical dimension of the typical. Thomas Mann continues:

> His character is a mythical role which the actor just emerged from the depths to the light plays in the illusion that it is his own and unique, that he, as it were, has invented it all himself, with a dignity and security of which his supposed unique individuality in time and space is not the source, but rather which he creates out of his deeper consciousness in order that something which was once founded and legitimized shall again be represented and once more for good or ill, whether nobly or basely, in any case after its own kind conduct itself according to pattern. Actually, if his existence consisted merely in the unique and the present, he would not know how to conduct himself at all; he would be confused, helpless, unstable in his own self-regard, would not know which foot to put foremost or what sort of face to put on. His dignity and security lie all unconsciously in the fact that with him something timeless has once more emerged into the light and become present; it is a character; it is native worth, because its origin lies in the unconscious.[28]

Against the background of this splendid analysis offered by Mann, we can understand the mythical role of the types in classical cinema, the reporter, the sergeant, the

27. Thomas Mann, "Freud and the Future," in *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 421.
28. Ibid., 422-23.

sheriff, the deputy, and so on, and the actors who embody them, who are these types. And then there are us, mesmerized by this mythic revelation about our individual existences, where we glimpse forms that transcend the unpleasant contingency that holds them together. For Cavell, this is the natural mode of revelation of cinema. As he writes:

> One might say that what De Sica and Bresson (and others) have shown is that there is something of the type in us all, something of the singular and the mythical. It is not merely that we occupy certain roles in society, play certain parts or hold certain offices, but that we are set apart or singled out for sometimes incomprehensible reasons, for rewards or punishments out of all proportion to anything we recognize ourselves as doing or being, as though our lives are the enactments of some tale whose words continuously escape us.[29]

In the rambling finitude of our lives, we can read the transfigured return of characters that lift us out of time, into a mythical dimension. It is this revelation that instructs us in everyday life, illuminating it with unexplored possibilities and untaken turns. By shaping the contingent flow of events, memories, and expectations according to an exemplary model, we transform our lives by situating ourselves in conversation with the great personalities who inhabit this mythic dimension, freeing our existence from the sense of being imprisoned in the place and time of our earthly settlement, which is now revealed as full of unseen possibilities. I am echoing here a line of thought that Cavell has elaborated under the title of *moral perfectionism*. John Stuart Mill gave voice to this ethical possibility of elevation, which is also a form of habitation in our earthly existence, when he envisioned education as training to feel the absence of noble aims and aspirations as degrading. We need "to have a feeling of the miserable smallness of mere self in the face of this great universe, of the collective mass of our fellow creatures, in the face of past history and of the indefinite future." And continues:

> Thus feeling, we learn to respect ourselves only so far as we feel capable of nobler objects: and if unfortunately those by whom we are surrounded do not

29. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 180.

> share our aspirations, perhaps disapprove the conduct to which we are prompted by them — to sustain ourselves by the ideal sympathy of the great characters in history, or even in fiction, and by the contemplation of an idealized posterity: shall I add, of ideal perfection embodied in a Divine Being?[30]

This conversation with the great characters of history, in the works of the imagination, and with those who are placed in an idealized posterity, offers us an image of the dwelling of the self in this mythic dimension, where the words, characters, and events of the past or from elsewhere in the imagination become present to us, establishing a conversation in which we can live transfiguring our own present existence. Cavell will fully develop the concept of moral perfectionism at the time of the completion of his book *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*,[31] but we can find echoes of it in his elaboration of the mythological inhabitation of our lives that follows in Mann's footsteps.

We can also see how this complex description of the naturalness and magic of Hollywood cinema corresponds to a precise characterization of European modernism that is evoked by the quotation from Thomas Mann and that we can now illustrate more precisely. Both aspects that Cavell highlights, the ontology of the screen and the types that populate it, are part of European modernism. A distinctive modernist experience is summoned here, which can be specified as the crisis of realism and its conventions, the crisis of psychological and social contextualization, and the emergence of the world as something created by the forces of writing alone, and of human beings as typical figures, presences filled with the situations created for them. This is precisely what Milan Kundera describes when he comments on the modernist novel of Central Europe:

> Here we are seeing a quiet but radical shift in aesthetics: the idea that for a character to be "lifelike," "strong" artistically "successful," a writer need not

30. John Stuart Mill, "Inaugural Address to the University of St. Andrews," in *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education: Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXI*, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 254.
31. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism — The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

> supply all the possible data on him; there is no need to make us believe he is as real as you and I; for him to be strong and unforgettable, it is enough that he fills the whole space of the situation the novelist has created for him.[32]

The mythology of cinema and of its types described by Cavell falls within Kundera's modernist framework. In the European experience, trust in the world and in others, and therefore in ourselves, having abandoned its natural objects, the nation, social rituals and roles, the Form taken by maturity, is pushed back into the infantilized private, where it steals words from their common circulation and uses them to propose novel constructions. Mann himself pauses to consider that the emulative model — according to which, by admiring and loving one's own mythic ideal and following in its footsteps, one shapes one's own life and creates something new and individual — is appropriate for children; we are like children imitating the great.[33] However, in the modernist experience — and we should set Mann aside for our purposes — this learning is also a theft, it is a stubborn and proud declaration of one's immaturity, and the most pertinent author is therefore Witold Gombrowicz with his *Ferdydurke*. The works of modernists like Gombrowicz, and we must add Kafka, are constructions that rely neither on verisimilitude nor on allegory; they establish a world through the power of words alone (words stolen and employed in a new space) and create characters who are types without psychological depth, like the individuals who inhabit the novels of Gombrowicz and Kafka.

The conclusion I wish to draw is that Cavell characterizes the natural state of classical Hollywood cinema in modernist terms, with an implicit reference to the European experience as described by Kundera. European modernism works around the experience that tradition has disintegrated, and the individual is left with the task and urgency of recovering words that are now empty, stealing them to compose constructions in which every word and gesture counts because they cannot rely on the larger background. In this context, the imaginative world of art takes on a mythological depth, populated by personalities that tower like mythical figures.

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32. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 64.
33. Mann, *Freud and the Future,* 426.

American cinema, on the other hand, does not face a crisis, it expresses a culture that has the resources to rely on itself. It earned the trust of its audience by inventing its own world: "the films of Hollywood constituted a world, with recurrent faces more familiar to me than the faces of the neighbors of all the places I have lived."[34] This condition creates a myth that naturally casts a spell on the audience, thus defeating the modernist demand to prove its continuity with the art of cinema in every new instance. On the other hand, this natural reliance on the medium of film leads to an equally natural self-questioning of the medium itself, of its strangeness to its world and of our displacement from it, which is the central experience of film, revealing its power to offer us a world only at the price of absenting us from it.

4. Ordinary Experience and Democracy

Cavell insists on the experience of the viewer. Recalling the origins of the book, he writes that when he chose film as the subject of a seminar in aesthetics in 1963, one promising advantage seemed to be that "the absence of an established canon of criticism would mean that we would be forced back upon a faithfulness to nothing but our experience and a wish to communicate it."[35] The appeal to experience brings us back to the pioneering popular culture critic Robert Warshow and his idea of immediate experience, the natural trust we place in the world we see on the screen.[36] To bring us into his perspective Cavell begins by recalling a long list of films that can give us an idea of the countless afternoons spent at the movies, later remembering names, scenes and passages of conversation while talking about them with friends, absorbing them into everyday life by making these characters more familiar companions than one's neighbors[37]. The cinema that claims the attention devoted to it in this book is a cinema that, without questioning the distinctions between high and low that exist in other forms of art, such as music and the novel, opens itself to the experience of everyone and transcends the hierarchies between

34. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 36.
35. Ibid., xx.
36. See Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
37. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 9-13.

the popular and the noble arts. *The World Viewed* is about this problem. "Why are movies important?," asks Cavell.

> Music, painting, sculpture, poetry — as they are now sought by artists of major ambition, artists devoted to the making of objects meant as the live history of their art — are not *generally* important, except pretty much for the men and women devoted to creating them. [...] But rich and poor, those who care about no (other) art and those who live on the promise of art, those whose pride is education and those whose pride is power or practicality — all care about movies, await them, respond to them, remember them, talk about them, hate some of them, are grateful for some of them.[38]

At a time when societies have lost the ability to articulate their worlds in cultural representations, in the imagination of art, religion and politics, cinema comes to capture us again with its world projected on the screen, with its stories that make actors and types familiar to us and end up becoming intimate companions of our memories and conversations. This is the classical cinema examined in *The World Viewed*, cinema as part of American popular culture in the 1930s and 1940s, the United States recovering from the crisis of 1929 with seemingly limitless reserves of energy and hope.

Classical Hollywood cinema was born with an inherent democratic potential. This is another important thesis for Cavell. It knows how to talk about what ordinary people are interested in; it gives voice to the thoughts, desires, and conditions of ordinary people. It is concerned with ordinary experience because it banishes traditional hierarchies between educated and popular audiences: "in the case of films, it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones. You don't even know what the highest are instances of unless you know the typical as well."[39] The democratic potential lies in the conversation that takes place in the condition of equality that cinema establishes among its audience. Each person is placed on an equal footing in her

38. Ibid., 4-5.
39. Ibid., 6.

experience as a spectator and in her capacity to constitute an audience; her competence is built through the companies that come together by talking about the films they have seen: "It is the nature of these experiences to be lined with fragments of conversations and responses of friends I have gone to movies with. And with the times of sharing just afterwards."[40]

This shared experience is first and foremost that of the humanistic tradition. Cavell's entire body of work in the various fields unfolds around the tracks of a humanistic conception of intellectual work, unfolding a conversation with works that establish a tradition by listening to the voice of those who produced them — and once he arrives at the formulation of the concept of moral perfectionism, he illustrates in a sumptuous way how an ethical tradition can be constituted through the conversation that imaginative works establish with one another: works of philosophy, religious writings, critical, psychoanalytic, and sociological essays, poetry, novels, plays, and films.[41] Cinema, with its specificity, is part of this conversation, relating to the audience through the setting of the movie theater in the years when movies were seen and then remembered to become part of public culture. Therefore, the term ontology should not be misunderstood: the techniques, types and genres — the various automatisms that define the medium of film, as Cavell calls them — are conditions acknowledged within a tradition that demands personal response and a willingness for education. Against the idea that it is possible to proceed along a technical study of cinema, removed from the claim of experience and personal judgment about what matters to us in films, Cavell defends the study of cinema as a region of humanistic criticism of imaginative works, in agreement with what the great critic Robin Wood argued and practiced. The appropriate form of criticism is that which arises from the critic's total response to the work of art, which has as its opponents theory and ideology imposed by policing the response of one human being to the conviction and urgency with which another human being shapes her ideas in a creative work. The critic, like the artist, must surrender, if only provisionally, to her immediate experience (to recall Warshow's concept). As Wood writes:

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40. Ibid., , 9.
41. See Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 4-6. See also *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

> The richness of the work of Dickens and Hitchcock goes with their ideological helplessness: the stance outside their respective societies which alone would make possible a conscious ideological restructuring would automatically make *im*possible the richness, dependent as it is upon their role as entertainers within society, and upon a certain degree of trust of intuitive-emotional impulse.[42]

It is only by surrendering to one's experience, by provisionally submitting to the ideological world of an author, that we can emotionally and intellectually follow the subtle complexities of its structure, to then proceed by examining this experience, reflecting on it, having educated our experience through this encounter.[43]

The appeal to ordinary experience is also claimed by the philosophy of ordinary language, by Wittgenstein's and Austin's. In film criticism, the relevant notion of experience is that of the natural viewer, just as there are natural, native speakers who are the sources of knowledge when we question the meaning of words in the philosophy of ordinary language. The important scenes in a film are "all that native viewers accept as significant. Enough to guide the empirical discovery of the *a priori*. Why not? Criticism, as part of the philosophy of art, must aspire to philosophy. Its goal is the native view; the de-sophisticated."[44] What is the philosophy of ordinary language about? In his first book he had answered with the following words:

> The philosophy of ordinary language is not about language, anyway not in any sense in which it is not also about the world. Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about. The philosopher appealing to everyday language turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself.[45]

This is what cinema does, it talks about everything that interests ordinary people, it does not try to prove anything, but invites its audience to assess whether what has

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42. Robin Wood, "Levin and the Jam. Realism and Ideology," in *Personal Views: Explorations in Films*, rev. ed. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 109.
43. Ibid., 117-18.
44. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 202.
45. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 89.

struck them in an exchange of glances or in a conversation can shed light on their own experience. The urgency with which we try to remember a scene in a movie is similar to the urgency with which we need to remember a dream that suddenly fades away upon waking, with its reserve of mystery and revelation, even though movies are not dreams because we watch them and we are present to the world projected on the screen, whereas we are not present to our dreams, we dream them.[46] This urgency reveals the interest we take in our experience, in what is important in life. Movies teach us what is important to us, we test movies against our own experience, while allowing them to instruct us through the gifts of pleasure and companionship they offer. (We must also remember that *The World Viewed* is a "a kind of metaphysical memoir"[47] about a time in his life when going to the movies was a normal part of his week, and movies were seen only once and remembered: "I wrote primarily out of the memory of films," and if memory went wrong that is also a matter of interest that concerns his personal response to those films. Returning to his experience of movies a decade later, Cavell writes that this way of enjoying movies gave immediacy and depth to memory and helped build a culture based on what everyone could recall from memory, thus constituting a public memory).[48]

Cinema teaches us to assess experience through experience, to consult our own experience while subjecting it to scrutiny, which is the critical key set forth in *Pursuits of Happiness*:

> Checking one's experience is a rubric an American, or a spiritual American, might give to the empiricism practiced by Emerson and by Thoreau. I mean the rubric to capture the sense at the same time of consulting one's experience and of subjecting it to examination, and beyond these, of momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust.[49]

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46. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 211.
47. Ibid., xix.
48. See Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 26.
49. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12.

This dimension is intimately political and democratic, asking us to confront the culture that speaks on our behalf, the popular culture that gives voice to common interests and aspirations, and to test whether we individually can claim them (the critical term is "claim" which offers title to the volume *The Claim of Reason*),[50] whether each of us individually can assert with our own voice and claim as consonant with our individuality what is common, the language and political agreement that holds a society together.[51] Cavell's elaboration of the democratic theme is inseparable from his philosophical and epistemological defense of the individual, who is called to educate herself through experience in order to be able to assess the common that speaks on her behalf, to subject it to verification and thus to ascertain whether it can withstand the compromise between aspirations and reality or whether the present in which she lives cannot be so claimed and its rejection, that is disobedience, is necessary. These are the themes of the transcendentalist democrats who would later become the protagonists of Cavell's work, Thoreau and Emerson.[52]

The fact of equality and democracy is also represented in film by the prominence of the individuality of the type and star who recur in them, where the social role is in the background, it appears arbitrary or anecdotal, so that "movies have an inherent tendency toward the democratic, or anyway the idea of human equality. (But because of film's equally natural attraction to crowds, it has opposite tendencies toward the fascistic or populistic)."[53] However, the political community, like the reality that film establishes, has an eminently mythical character, as we have already considered.

> The myth of movies tells not of the founding of society but of a human gathering without natural or divine backing; of society before its securing (as in the Western) or after its collapse (as in the musical or the thirties' comedy, in which the principals of romance are left on their own to supply the legitimacy of their love). It shares with any myth the wish for origins and comprehension which lies behind the grasp of human history and arbitration.[54]

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50. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
51. See Sandra Laugier, "Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism: A Philosophy of Minor Genres," *MLN* 127, no. 5 (2012): 997-1012.
52. See Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.
53. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 35.
54. Ibid., 214.

The myth of cinema cannot ground democracy, it is placed outside the necessary temporality of life, where we tell stories about its origins and offer arguments for its legitimacy. The role of cinema is different: film, in its mythological revelation, evokes the fact that the human community survives the loss of authority it has suffered. "The myth of film is that nature survives our treatment of it and its loss of enchantment for us, and that community remains possible even when the authority of society is denied us."[55] The broader background of the world and nature, as well as that of the human and political community, is magically restored to us as myth and offers us the occasion to pursue the non-mythological work in our daily lives, motivated by it. At the time of completing *Pursuits of Happiness*, whose chapters were written in the years immediately following *The World Viewed*, Cavell discovers in the fast talk and brilliant dialogues of the protagonists of these couples, left alone to legitimize their love, a pattern of conversation that instructs us on how to weave the fabric of democracy out of the miniature social contract that is marriage. He teaches how to receptively unfold the myth of cinema taking facts of life that would otherwise cause horror and impassiveness — the fact of the limitation and finitude of human endeavor — as occasions for laughter, companionship, and instruction.

5. The End of a World

The natural power of cinema to offer us a world to inhabit and to find our own voice ends perhaps a little after the two golden decades of the 1930s and 1940s. It begins to end as color undermines the inherent drama of black and white, as actors, those specific familiar presences, age, as the types who unified a world with their constant presence disappear. It also ends because society is changing, and with it the reserve of hope that nourished it. As Cavell writes:

> We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that men doing the work of the world together are working for the world's good, or that if they are working for the world's harm they can be stopped. These beliefs flowered last in our films

55. Ibid.

> about the imminence and the experience of the Second World War, then began withering in its aftermath.[56]

Later cinema is part of another story. Cavell bluntly states: "Neo-Hollywood is not a world."[57] *The World Viewed* does not end the game, however; color, new characters who are no longer mythological individualities, the 1960s and shattered hopes give way to new continuations into another future. Hitchcock, Antonioni, and Polanski introduce other stories of cinema, new narrative threads that we can understand precisely by registering the fact that the natural mesmerizing power of classical cinema has been exhausted and cinema has reached its modernist phase imbued with intellectual attitudes. *The World Viewed* dwells on this continuation in several chapters including the one on color. The dramatic revelation of the world was the prerogative of black and white; color changes things radically, it remains entangled in fantasy, first of all that of make-believe with a film like Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood*; whereas when color becomes a necessity of the medium, it creates a world that is neither the past world of black and white nor that of fiction, but a futuristic feeling that expresses the premonition that the world we inhabit is already the future, as in *Red Desert*. In contrast, in masterpieces like *Vertigo* and *Rosemary's Baby*, color has the power to evoke a private fantasy, a privately created world. In Polanski's film, when Mia Farrow reads the headline in *Time* magazine asking, "Is God Dead?," she finds a dark announcement that concerns her. "In the absence of God, it is up to her to create God. And what is thus created, in isolation, is not God."[58]

Cavell has left us many writings on later cinema, including on Hitchcock, Bergman, and Rohmer, and yet it is clearly the miracle of classical Hollywood that captures the largest audiences with works that withstand the most sophisticated intellectual criticism, and it is the historical and personal experience of going to the movies, that give him the material for his reflective experience of film. After *The World Viewed*, the underlying theoretical framework changes, the modernist problematic disappears, as does the characterization of films in terms of types, and the concept of genre as a unifying entity enters the scene with the discovery of the

56. Ibid., 62.
57. Ibid., 76.
58. Ibid., 88.

comedy of remarriage in *In Pursuit of Happiness* and the related genre of the melodrama of the unknown woman in *Contesting Tears*.[59] However, these are books in which the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s returns as the protagonist. The history of cinema continues, but the magical power of creating a world is no longer repeated. In an interview given in Paris in 1999 on the occasion of the French translation of *The World Viewed*, Cavell commented on a critic's claim that film as we know it is essentially finished:

> It struck me not only that some such sense has been recurrent in the modern history of the arts, but specifically that I had felt some such way in writing *The World Viewed* — that an original relation to film, some pretheoretical trust, had been broken, causing stronger sense of discontinuity than, say, any development since the advent of the talkie. Without trying to give more details, what I can reconstruct is that I was writing as if I were an emissary from another time, foreign, and it is not clear whether I was coming from the past or from an unexplored future; that is, it is not clear whether I was trying to refresh the memory or to shake the imagination of my noncontemporaries.[60]

Film theory and criticism continue to draw on Cavell's teaching to continue his conversation about the present of cinema and its new forms, such as television series, but it is this moment in American cinema that has given Cavell a world from which to speak to us and one that we can visit by engaging with his books.[61]

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59. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
60. Cavell, "Concluding Remarks Presented at Paris Colloquium on *La Projection du monde,"* in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 282.
61. The present article is a translation, with minor revisions and additions, of the Introduction, "Cavell e la magia del cinema," to the Italian edition of Cavell, *The World Viewed*: *Il mondo visto. Riflessioni sull'ontologia del cinema*, trans. Paolo Babbiotti, ed. Piergiorgio Donatelli (Imola: Cue Press, 2023).

9. From Shakespeare's Birthplace to Thoreau's Cabin: Exploring Collections, Museums, and Literature with Stanley Cavell

DAVID RUDRUM

1. Introduction

Most of the writings collected in *Here and There* will be encountered by most of its readers for the first time. Though the vast majority of them have seen the light of day before, they were, as Cavell saw it, "worth rescuing either from oblivion or from the evanescence or specialization of their original locations of publication."[1]

One obvious exception to this rule is the chapter that forms the main focus of this paper: "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting." This appeared, in a slightly different version and without its subtitle, as the final chapter of *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (2005), where it was in turn anthologized as a somewhat expanded version of an essay Cavell originally wrote for an exhibition catalogue some years previously, in 1998.

This essay did not need rescuing. It was in plain sight, and not hidden by it. Moreover, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* was the final collection of essays Cavell published in his lifetime, separated from his tragically unfinished plans for *Here and There* only by the intervening autobiographical departure of his *Little Did I Know* (2010). He described the purpose of *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* thus: "this collection is to give an idea of the span of things I have been thinking

1. Cavell, *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy*, ed. Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 291.

about over the seven years since I retired from regular teaching"; he specifically said of the purpose of its final chapter — "The World as Things" — that it "marks in further ways distances I take from the space of the classroom, a tendency that over a lifetime of teaching and writing has been meant to portray my understanding of the responsibilities of that space."[2]

To state the case plainly: Cavell revisited "The World as Things" not just once but twice; he returned to it over a period of some twenty years; it was republished even though there was no obvious need to do so; and the editors of *Here and There* regard it as "crucial to the present volume as a reflection on thought as a process of collecting."[3] This ought to be enough to single it out as worthy of careful and close reading. As we have seen, Cavell designated *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* as a "collection," and he chose to end that collection with these thoughts on collecting:

> Why do we put things together as we do? Why do we put ourselves together with just these things to make a world? What choices have we said farewell to? To put things together differently, so that they quicken the heart, would demand their recollecting.[4]

These words, verbatim, are left unchanged as the final words of the republished version in *Here and There*.[5] One is reminded of the Wittgensteinian revolution in philosophy that Cavell postulated in this essay and elsewhere: the revolution in which philosophy effects fundamental and revolutionary change precisely by leaving everything exactly as it is. And yet "The World as Things" is not just recollected, it is re-collected. Placed in a new collection, it takes on resonances and nuances that indicate how Cavell's "themes out of school" can be taken even further from the classroom — and perhaps beyond the kinds of gallery spaces for which he originally wrote this essay — than he had realised when republishing it back in 2005. That is the contention of this paper, and it will stake its claims by paying particular attention to literary collections, literary museums, literary spaces.

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2. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), 6.
3. Cavell, *Here and There,* 4.
4. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 280.
5. Cavell, "The World as Things," in *Here and There*, 33-71.

2. Virginia Woolf on Carlyle's Plumbing

Towards the start of his essay on collecting, Cavell quotes Walter Benjamin approvingly, and ruminates for a while on his remark that "Living means leaving traces."[6] Collectors cannot but leave their traces on the "medals, coins, stamps, books, skeletons, jewels, jewel boxes, locks, clocks, armor, vases, sarcophagi, inscriptions, paintings, curiosities" and so on that they collect.[7] Towards the end of the essay, he reflects on whether the human propensity for collecting things might be related to our mortality: "Does the passion for collecting have something to say about such matters as coming to an end?"[8] Collecting, then, seems to involve accumulating the traces of a life lived, yet is simultaneously somehow no less expressive of the fact of death.

To help us understand that this is not a paradox, let us turn to an intriguing observation of Virginia Woolf's:

> London, happily, is becoming full of great men's houses, bought for the nation and preserved entire with the chairs they sat on and the cups they drank from, their umbrellas and their chests of drawers. And it is no frivolous curiosity that sends us to Dickens's house and Johnson's house and Carlyle's house and Keats's house. We know them from their houses — it would seem to be a fact that writers stamp themselves upon their possessions more indelibly than other people. Of artistic taste they may have none; but they seem always to possess a much rarer and more interesting gift — a faculty for housing themselves appropriately, for making the table, the chair, the curtain, the carpet into their own image.[9]

The many hundreds of writer's house museums around the world — from Shakespeare's birthplace to Thoreau's cabin — ought to furnish us with enough evidence to take seriously Woolf's assertion that writers leave the traces of their lives

6. See Cavell, "The World as Things," 42.
7. Ibid., 34.
8. Ibid., 67.
9. Virginia Woolf, "Great Men's Houses," in *The London Scene* (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), 23.

on the objects they owned. One visitor to the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth, seeing Charlotte's bridal bonnet and the couch on which Emily died, marvelled that: "They touched this, wore that, wrote here in a house redolent with ghosts."[10] (The visitor in question was Sylvia Plath).

Given the cues he takes from Benjamin, it is perhaps surprising that Cavell does not dwell longer on the "aura" surrounding unique objects such as these. Or perhaps the connection is obvious enough that it goes without saying. Instead, he follows up Benjamin's observation that if to live a life means to leave behind traces, then the literary upshot of this view of life finds its natural expression in the emergence of "the detective story," as pioneered by Poe, "which investigated these traces."[11] And when it comes to investigating the traces of literary artifacts, there can be few clearer examples of such detective work than Woolf's on the occasion of her visit to Carlyle's house, from which I quote here at length:

> Take the Carlyles, for instance. One hour spent in 5 Cheyne Row will tell us more about them than we can learn from all the biographies. Go down into the kitchen. There, in two seconds, one is made acquainted with a fact that escaped the attention of Froude, and yet was of incalculable importance – they had no water laid on. Every drop that the Carlyles used — and they were Scots, fanatical in their cleanliness — had to be pumped by hand from a well in the kitchen. There is the well at this moment and the pump and the stone trough into which the cold water trickled. And here, too, is the wide and wasteful old grate upon which all kettles had to be boiled if they wanted a hot bath; and here is the cracked yellow tin bath, so deep and so narrow, which had to be filled with the cans of hot water that the maid first pumped and then boiled and then carried up three flights of stairs from the basement.
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> The high old house without water, without electric light, without gas fires, full of books and coal smoke and four-poster beds and mahogany

10. Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath,* ed. Karen. V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 588-89. Quoted by Nicola J. Watson in *The Author's Effects: On Writer's House Museums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 75. I am indebted throughout this paper to Watson's extraordinary work, which is likely to dominate discussions of writers' house museums for the foreseeable future.
11. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism,* trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 168-69, as quoted by Cavell in "The World as Things," 42.

> cupboards, where two of the most nervous and exacting people of their time lived, year in year out, was served by one unfortunate maid.[12]

Having made such observations, Woolf proceeds, like Dupin or Holmes, to making her deductions. "The voice of the house — and all houses have voices – is the voice of pumping and scrubbing."[13] The noise of the maid drawing the water and clattering the pails would have made it hard for Carlyle to concentrate — "Up in the attic under a skylight Carlyle groaned, as he wrestled with his history"[14] — and disturbed the rest of the sickly Mrs Carlyle, in turn disturbing Carlyle's work further. "Thus number 5 Cheyne Row is not so much a dwelling place as a battlefield — the scene of labour, effort and perpetual struggle."[15] The traces left by this struggle, she concludes, can be found in the writings of Carlyle:

> It is impossible not to believe that half their quarrels might have been spared and their lives immeasurably sweetened if only number 5 Cheyne Row had possessed, as the house agents put it, bath, h. and c., gas fires in the bedrooms, all modern conveniences and indoor sanitation. But then, we reflect, as we cross the worn threshold, Carlyle with hot water laid on would not have been Carlyle.[16]

In summary: according to Woolf, it was Carlyle's plumbing, or more accurately the lack thereof, that moulded his philosophy of history as the sum of the deeds of great men, who are all the greater for their persistent striving to rise above their battles with the challenges that everyday life throws in their way. "Such is the effect of a pump in the basement and a yellow tin bath up three pairs of stairs."[17]

Woolf is in fine satirical form here. According to Carlyle's philosophy, "the soul of the whole world's history" is "at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" and of their achievements;[18] according to Woolf's, history consists of

12. Woolf, "Great Men's Houses," 23-24.
13. Ibid., 24.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 25.
16. Ibid., 26.
17. Ibid., 25.
18. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. David R. Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 21.

the unspoken achievements of countless women whose names have been forgotten and who never had a room of their own — women like the Carlyles' maids, many of whom lasted just a matter of days in the job. What could come of her visit to his house (which, incidentally, her father helped to save for posterity) if not just such an intellectual ribbing? But what is Woolf satirising here? Is it just Carlyle's ideas, or might the target of her mockery extend to Benjamin's argument — surely no less outlandish than Woolf's — that detective fiction was engendered by Victorian-era domestic interiors? And where does Cavell stand in all this?

Cavell frequently praised thinkers who broke from the default tone of seriousness into which philosophy is typically straitjacketed: he approved of Austin's stories and Wittgenstein's jokes. So I cannot imagine he would object to Woolf's piece of philosophical satire. Moreover, *pace* Benjamin, Cavell's Poe was not just the inventor of detective fiction. For Cavell, Poe is simultaneously the philosophical champion of "the perverse," the short-circuiting of reason and the making of wrong connections.[19] So Cavell suggests that tracing the life of the self from the traces it leaves on objects is a diverting fiction:

> The idea that the evidence of life produced by each of us is of the order of traces, conveys a picture according to which no concatenation of these impressions ever reaches to the origin of these signs of life, call it a self.[20]

Detective stories came about not to show that lives can be traced from the traces on objects, but to ward off the knowledge that they can't.

As for Woolf, she seems to have been conflicted on this point. Her mixed feelings were expressed after her visit to the Brontë Parsonage:

> The museum is certainly rather a pallid and inanimate collection of objects [...]. Here are many autograph letters, pencil drawings, and other documents. But the most touching case — so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze —

19. Cavell's discussions of Poe have not been paid the scholarly attention they deserve. For more on this, see my "What Did Cavell Want of Poe?", in *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 122-33.
20. Cavell, "The World as Things," 43.

> is that which contains the little personal relics of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. Her shoes and her thin muslin dress have outlived her.[21]

Nicola J. Watson glosses this passage as evidencing:

> a struggle between conceiving Brontë as a writer and Brontë as a woman. The writing seems dead, "pallid" and "inanimate," reduced to mere "objects." By contrast, shoes and dress have "outlived" the writer, remaining uncomfortably vivid and able to bring the dead woman to uneasy and imperfect life.[22]

So for Woolf, objects and the traces left upon them do indeed seem to carry on a certain life after death — but *not* the life of the mind.

Granted, looking at Kafka's cutlery is unlikely to grant us much insight into the mind that gave us "Metamorphosis" and *The Trial*.[23] But why, then, do we exhibit collections of writers' artefacts at all? Why do millions of people around the world flock to see them? The common analogy is with secular pilgrimage, and it is noteworthy that Woolf, like many others, refers to Brontë's belongings as "relics."[24] This conveys a sense of unthinking worship rather than philosophical or literary detective work. And that in turn takes us to a certain story by Henry James about a great writer's birthplace — a story that attracted Cavell's attention in his later work.

3. Henry James on Shakespeare's Birthplace

In *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* and indeed in other later writings, Cavell wrote about one of Henry James's less critically acclaimed tales, "The Birthplace,"

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21. Woolf, "Haworth, November 1904," *The Guardian*, 21 December 1904. Again, I am indebted to Watson for bringing this quotation to my attention, *The Author's Effects*, 85.
22. Watson, *The Author's Effects*, 86.
23. The example is from Katerina Kroucheva and Barbara Schaff, eds., *Kafkas Gabel: Überlegungen zum Ausstellen von Literatur* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014).
24. The analogy is a commonplace, and is clearly explored in Alison Booth, *Homes and Haunts: Touring Writers' Shrines and Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

which he calls "a satirical fable about the search for the biographical facts of the Supreme Author (unmistakably identified, or deified, as Shakespeare)."[25] Morris Gedge takes on a job conducting tourists around Shakespeare's birthplace, and fights with his conscience and his wife Isabel over the ethics of purveying curatorial speculation and conjecture as biographical fact. For though the visiting public "love to think He was born there,"[26] Gedge becomes so disillusioned with his work that he becomes convinced that no trace of the sacred author remains to be found in his birthplace: "I'll be hanged if He's *here*!," he exclaims.[27]

James's tale is replete with the vocabulary of pilgrimage: Morris Gedge becomes "the priest of the idol," and the birthplace is a "sacred spot," a "temple," a "shrine" with "relics" and "pilgrims" and "worshippers," the "Holy of Holies," the "Mecca of the English-speaking race."[28] Indeed, Cavell notes that "while it deals in some parody of a banal religiosity, the smile gets wiped off its face."[29] But a pilgrimage can entail two subtly but importantly different purposes: its destination can be a sacred place, but it can also be to view a collection of objects (typically relics). James's story brings the two together: it is a "sacred spot" that houses a collection of "relics." Since our discussion involves collections rather than places, this paper will try to tease the implications of the two apart — though this may not, ultimately, be possible.

An easily-overlooked narrative arc in the story concerns the significance of the museum's collection. At the start of the story, an initially unconvinced Isabel Gedge is drawn to the job partly because the idea of working with the collection of objects on display is attractive to her: "she saw herself waving a nicely-gloved hand over a collection of remarkable objects and saying to a compact crowd of gaping awe-struck persons: 'And now, please, *this* way'."[30] The reality of the job is that if these persons are awestruck at all, they are likelier to be awestruck by the place and the objects in it than by the works of the Supreme Author. "It isn't about Him — nothing's about

25. Cavell, "Foreword," in *Philosophical Shakespeares,* ed. John J. Joughin (London: Routledge, 2000), xii.
26. Henry James, "The Birthplace," in *The Jolly Corner and Other Tales, 1903-1910,* ed. N. H. Reeve (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 26.
27. Ibid., 31.
28. Ibid., 23, 5, 4, 5, 16, 10, 17, 17, and 5.
29. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 63.
30. James, "The Birthplace," 5.

Him," a disillusioned Gedge exclaims in despair.[31] "None of Them care tuppence about Him. The only thing They care about is this empty shell — or rather, for it isn't empty, the extraneous preposterous stuffing of it."[32]

Cavell assigns huge significance to this story. He says: "it strikes me as the most fruitful understanding of the idea of the death of the author that I am aware of,"[33] outstripping the "obvious warhorses" of Barthes and Foucault,[34] and anticipating their substantial debt to Nietzsche's writings on the death of God. Moreover, Cavell goes so far as to say that this story models his understanding of "the task of criticism" as derived

> from Kant's portrayal of the universality and necessity of aesthetic judgment, namely as grounded in its demand for agreement with its response to its object as one of pleasure without a concept. Criticism accordingly becomes a work of determining, as it were after the fact, the grounds of (the concepts shaping) pleasure and value in the working of the object. In this light criticism becomes a conduct of gratitude, one could say, a specification and test of tribute, a test in which I am inherently exposed to rebuke.[35]

No doubt all this will come across as placing a greater burden upon the shoulders of a single short story than it could reasonably be expected to bear — the familiar charge of "over-reading" that has dogged Cavell's work since forever.[36] So let us unpack some of the issues involved.

Cavell finds, in the attitudes of the main characters in James's tale, a range of possibilities for criticism, or, as he puts it, of "coming to terms with our relation to the work that art does, and hence, according to the way I read James, in our knowledge of the existence of others."[37] Of these, he describes that of Gedge's wife Isabel as the most "primitive position,"[38] because it is grounded in a concern with and for

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31. Ibid., 18.
32. Ibid., 18.
33. Cavell, "Foreword," xii.
34. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 66.
35. Ibid., 67.
36. Speaking for the defence, see Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Zizek and Cavell* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
37. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 64.
38. Ibid., 65.

empirical facts, and assumes that our appreciation of Shakespeare's works can be grounded simply in factual knowledge about their origins. She reminds her husband of the importance of facts in the following conversation:

> "For there are the facts."
>
> "Yes — there are the facts."
>
> "I mean the principal ones. They're all that the people—the people who come — want."
>
> "Yes — they must be all they want."
>
> "So that they're all that those who've been in charge have needed to know."
>
> "Ah," he said as if it were a question of honour, "we must know everything."
>
> She cheerfully acceded: she had the merit, he felt, of keeping the case within bounds. "Everything. But about him personally," she added, "there isn't, is there? so very very much."
>
> "More, I believe, than there used to be. They've made discoveries."
>
> It was a grand thought. "Perhaps we shall make some!"[39]

And the Gedges do indeed make some important discoveries that inform our appreciation of Shakespeare — leaving it open for the moment whether "Shakespeare" means the man, his works, or both — though those discoveries are not of the kind they envisage here at the outset.

Isabel Gedge's view strikes Cavell as "primitive" because our sense of appreciation or "wonder over this man is not to do with the small number of facts about his life we have to work with. No set of facts could themselves alleviate our ignorance."[40] As he puts it in another essay in the same volume, empirical facts cannot address, let alone account for, "the wonder that just these orders of words can have been found, that these things can be said at all. (The issue [...] of Shakespeare's identity serves to blunt this wonder, namely that *anyone* can have

39. James, "The Birthplace," 7-8.
40. Cavell, "Foreword," xiii.

been responsible for these texts, in however imperfect states)."[41] But why would empirically-grounded criticism blunt this sense of wonder? Do biographical facts make texts less wondrous? How?

Facts, *qua* facts, command a universal assent that mere opinions do not. It follows that, on Cavell's view of what criticism is, fact-based criticism is oxymoronic. The claims we advance in criticism are grounded in subjective opinions, even as they aim for, or seek, or aspire to (or, to put it in Kantianese, "posit") the kind of universal assent afforded to facts. A young American tourist in James's text opines: "'The play's the thing'. Let the author alone."[42] Interesting, his opinion strikes Cavell as "the most civilized, combining interest with torment."[43]

It might come as a surprise that this position strikes Cavell as "civilized" — a term that few would use in matters of literary criticism today without embarrassment. In some of his earlier discussions of the nature of criticism, he claimed the very opposite. Taking issue with the New Critics' dismissal of authorial intention, he argued: "What counts is what is *there*, says the philosopher who distrusts appeals to intention. Yes, but everything that is there is something a man has *done*."[44] So, for the Cavell who wrote "A Matter of Meaning It," the author is a central figure who cannot be overlooked in our acts of criticism, where "criticism" means grounding our shared relationship to the work of art, and the pleasures and values we find in our appreciation of it: "In art, our interest in intention, given the fact that we are confronted by someone's work, is to locate ourselves in its shift of events. In all cases, the need is for coming to terms, for taking up the import of a human gesture."[45] What, then, would be so very "civilized" about a young American tourist's disregard for the human being behind such gestures — in this case, for Shakespeare?

James's story insinuates that most of the facts surrounding Shakespeare's birthplace are not facts at all — they are, as with so many saints' shrines, legends. And

41. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 36.
42. James, "The Birthplace," 34.
43. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.
44. Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 236.
45. Ibid., 236.

the power of the legends trumps the status of the facts. Visitors to the birthplace want:

> "to see where He had His dinner and where He had His tea [...] They want to see where He hung up His hat and where He kept His boots and where His mother boiled her pot."
>
> "But if you don't show them —?"
>
> "They show *me*. It's in all their little books."
>
> "You mean," the husband asked, "that you've only to hold your tongue?"
>
> "I try to," said Gedge.[46]

No wonder that Gedge prefers "the company of people to whom he hadn't to talk, as he phrased it, rot."[47] His choice of silence is one that Cavell likens to that of John Cage.[48] But his wife makes a different choice, and, *pace* Cavell, it is not grounded in simple empiricism. She *knows* that most of the "facts" about Shakespeare purveyed in his birthplace are not facts. She holds the collection of objects there in high regard, though she knows they are of dubious provenance. Nevertheless, as befits such a Shakespearean tale, she prefers to avoid or forego this knowledge, and clings to the cherished legends as if they were indeed factual. This earns her the contempt of her husband. He scoffs:

> "You're no more than one of Them."
>
> "If it's being no more than one of Them to love it," she answered, "then I certainly am. And I'm not ashamed of my company."
>
> "To love *what*?" said Morris Gedge.
>
> "To love to think He was born there."[49]

Thanks to this moment of marital disharmony, we can place the different critical approaches set out in this tale into sharper comparison.

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46. James, "The Birthplace," 32.
47. Ibid., 35.
48. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.
49. James, "The Birthplace," 26.

Isabel Gedge, then, seems to undergo something of a conversion experience in her critical views: her initial preference for "the facts" turns out to be a preference for the authority that goes along with them. Deprived of their facticity, she would rather embrace the authority of (once again, let's put it in broadest Kantianese) a *sensus communis* she knows to be grounded on falsehood than to be deprived of all critical authority. It is almost as if a Thomas Gradgrind were to fall back on the support of a Stanley Fish (I said *almost*).

Is this to adopt a stance that Emerson would write off as mere conformity? Not quite: conformity is usually unthinking conformity, whereas Isabel's is self-aware, and consciously chosen as the lesser of two evils. Is it, perhaps, an act of bad faith? Perhaps, but only if you believe that the truth about Shakespeare necessarily trumps the myth of Shakespeare as constructed in our culture. Cavell himself confessed: "Of course I too share the temptation to idolatry of Shakespeare"[50] — so surely the custodian of the museum and its collection at Shakespeare's birthplace can be forgiven for yielding to it, and not, or not just, out of a self-interested desire to preserve her position there. It is a choice to place loyalty to a culture's cherished image of itself over loyalty to facts, or, more accurately, to the *absence* of facts. This, too, could be construed as an act of criticism as civility.

For the young American tourist, the absence of facts yields a freedom from facts — an opportunity rather than a threat. As Cavell puts it:

> When he says "The play's the thing" the tone of enjoyment I get from it brings into view the theory that the thing of art is its invitation to and provision of play, an oasis of freedom within human life, and the cost of letting the artist alone is to let him or her indeed escape us like a thief in the night (rather, perhaps, than coming to us like a thief in the night).[51]

The American tourist uses a slightly different metaphor:

> "[…] people pretend to catch Him like a flown canary, over whom you can close your hand, and put Him back in the cage. He won't *go* back; he

50. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare,* updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30.
51. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.

> won't *come* back. He's not" — the young man laughed — "such a fool! It makes Him the happiest of all great men."[52]

What both these images share is the sense of the artist as escapologist — as refusing to be contained, confined, or pinned down. It is a widely held critical view, once elevated to an article of faith by those poststructuralist warhorses Cavell mentions. For them, as seemingly for James' American tourist, it involved a rejection of the voice of cultural authority, and a wholesale distrust of any *sensus communis* built out of it. In this sense, the position is perhaps not as "civilized" as Cavell implies.

What I am trying to bring to light here is a basic ambiguity in these two models of criticism that Cavell finds in James's "The Birthplace" — an ambiguity bordering on an incompatibility. On the one hand, Cavell argues that claims of criticism aim at universality and find their grounding in the assent of others; on the other hand, invoking "the Nietzschean moment,"[53] Cavell argues for a model of criticism that resembles Emersonian self-reliance in its rejection of conformity to the *sensus communis aestheticus*. Critical interpretations, then, would appear simultaneously to posit unanimous acceptance *and* comprehensive rejection.

James's story hints at this impasse in the contrasting attitudes with which both the aforementioned characters regard the tale's setting — Shakespeare's birthplace — both of which seem ultimately flawed, even reprehensible. The young American tourist, when asked "what's the use [...] of our coming here?," can answer only: "Why, the place is charming in itself."[54] So, the corollary of letting the author alone as a critical methodology is an indifferent disregard to the significance with which the "sacred spot" has been invested — an indifference perhaps more philistine than "civilized." Isabel asks herself the same question: "If it was all in the air [...] that He *had* been born in the Birthroom, where was the value of the sixpences they took? where the equivalent they had engaged to supply?"[55] Her answer is to brush away any such doubts by regurgitating legend as fact. She maintains to all comers that Shakespeare was born:

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52. James, "The Birthplace," 31.
53. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 65.
54. James, "The Birthplace," 32.
55. Ibid., 24.

> "just about *here*"; and she must tap the place with her foot. "Altered? Oh dear, no — save in a few trifling particulars; you see the place — and isn't that just the charm of it? — quite as *He* saw it. Very poor and homely, no doubt; but that's just what's so wonderful."[56]

It is precisely the answer that those instilled with literary culture and good middleclass taste want to hear, and is perfectly civilized, except insofar as it is not true, which means that Isabel's answer is knowingly dishonest. Tellingly, Morris Gedge admonishes his wife by saying "We mustn't, love, tell too many lies."[57] No such reprimand can be given to the young American tourist: since the claims his form of criticism make are not grounded in fact, they cannot be lies. But that does not imply he has the upper hand morally: things are not so clear cut. Morris's admonishment is telling not because it draws a categorical distinction between criticism and lying, but because it *fails* to do so. Note that Isabel is urged not to tell "too many" lies: how many is too many? Too many for what? There is a world of difference between not telling *too many* lies and "Thou shalt not lie."

Here we come to the crux of the matter. If Isabel is wrong to appeal to bogus kinds of cultural authority in bolstering the claims her criticism makes, then wouldn't the task of the philosopher be to show her her errors and to point her towards more valid grounds and arguments, rather than to simply renounce all grounds and authorities? The role of the Athenian gadfly, after all, is to sting the members of the *polis* into truth, or at least into a new self-awareness, rather than into ungrounded new opinions.

How might we go about a form of criticism that sought to combine these two flawed positions? What is so fascinating about "The Birthplace" is that Morris Gedge, our (anti-)hero, does just that. When the American tourists try to pin him down on whether the chamber known as the Birthroom really was the place Shakespeare was actually born in, he responds: "I don't say it wasn't — but I don't say it *was*."[58] He takes to visiting the Birthroom alone, at midnight, after the tourists have left and the

56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 32.

museum is deserted, and it seems that James is being only half-ironic in observing that Gedge hopes to meet Shakespeare's ghost there:

> The Holy of Holies of the Birthplace was the low, the sublime Chamber of Birth, sublime because, as the Americans usually said — unlike the natives they mostly found words—it was so pathetic; and pathetic because it was — well, really nothing else in the world that one could name, number or measure. It was as empty as a shell of which the kernel has withered, and contained neither busts nor prints nor early copies; it contained only the Fact — *the* Fact itself — which, as he stood sentient there at midnight, our friend, holding his breath, allowed to sink into him. He *had* to take it as the place where the spirit would most walk and where He would therefore be most to be met, with possibilities of recognition and reciprocity.[59]

The irony becomes rather more pronounced when Morris discusses this routine of his with Isabel:

> "In the Birthroom there, when I look in late, I often put out my light. That makes it better."
>
> "Makes what — ?"
>
> "Everything."
>
> "What is it then you see in the dark?"
>
> "Nothing!" said Morris Gedge.
>
> "And what's the pleasure of that?"
>
> "Well, what the American ladies say. It's so fascinating!"[60]

Perhaps Morris is beholding, as Wallace Stevens put it, "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."[61] Or, vaulting from "everything" to "nothing" in a mere breath, perhaps he might say, with Wittgenstein, "It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either. The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something

59. Ibid., 17.
60. Ibid., 19-20.
61. Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 9-10.

about which nothing could be said."[62] That is an importantly different criticism, yielding claims different from Isabel's (and might help clarify why Morris thinks she should not tell *too many* lies, as opposed to not lying — lies that inflate the something into serving better than the nothing), *and* it is a different claim from that of the young American tourist, against whom Morris's actions demonstrate that we "*cannot* leave the author alone."[63]

Opting for solitude, darkness, and nothingness might not seem like a best case for acts of criticism. But Gedge's critical stance has much to recommend itself. For one thing, he confronts the knowledge that Isabel avoids: he meets head-on the strong possibility that the kind of criticism he peddles — biographically-based, site-specific, author-centric — is grounded on claims that are groundless. For another, he pays what is due to the reverence in which the birthplace is held: he does not dismiss it out of hand, as the young American tourist would, but nor does he buy into its mythology. The hype surrounding it can be set to one side, but it cannot be altogether disregarded.

I promised, in this paper, to discuss the role of collections and things in the context of literary museums, yet have now spent some pages discussing fictional representations of such a museum, and focussing more on what they might suggest about the nature of criticism than considering the nature and status of the things collected in them. So, as a practical illustration of the matter at hand, I turn now to another American writer who visited Shakespeare's birthplace in the nineteenth century. Let us consider Washington Irving, and his observations on Shakespeare's chair.

The indefatigable detective work of Nicola J. Watson has tracked down no less than five chairs exhibited in Stratford-upon-Avon as Shakespeare's chair. All were bogus: "not one of these chairs is thought to be older than the 1630s."[64] One was sold to Princess Czartoyska of Poland in the 1790s, and is now on display at the Polish National Museum in Krakow. No wonder Irving found it hard to credit the authenticity of Shakespeare's chair when he visited years later, in 1815.

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62. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §304.
63. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* 66.
64. Watson, *The Author's Effects,* 101.

> The most favourite object of curiosity, however, is Shakespeare's chair. It stands in the chimney nook of a small gloomy chamber. [...] In this chair it is the custom of every one that visits the house to sit: whether this be done with the hope of imbibing any of the inspiration of the bard I am at a loss to say, I merely mention the fact; and mine hostess privately assured me, that, though built of solid oak, such was the fervent zeal of devotees, that the chair had to be new bottomed at least once in three years. It is worthy of notice also in the history of this extraordinary chair, that it partakes something of the nature of the Santa Casa of Loretto, or the flying chair of the Arabian enchanter; for though sold some years since to a northern princess, yet, strange to tell, it has found its way back to the old chimney corner.[65]

Irving knows what Morris knows: that the chair is utterly bogus. But he also appreciates what Morris appreciates: that this fact makes Shakespeare's chair more remarkable, not less. Irving is palpably amused at "the fervent zeal of devotees," but he finds this zeal worthy of comment and consideration. If the chair were really Shakespeare's, how much could it really reveal about our relationship to the man and his work? By contrast, the fact that the chair is treated as a relic when even the tour guide admits that the part the tourists sit on is a recent replacement reveals much more about our relationship to the man and his work. Gedge himself, bowing to the weight of this force, reinvents himself as just such a tour guide, and succeeds all the more not in spite of but because of his knowledge that the museum and its collection are inauthentic.

In "The World as Things," Cavell mentions philosophers who claim "to understand the self [...] as some kind of collection of things, as though such a collection is less metaphysically driven on the face of it than the simple and continued self that Hume famously denies."[66] That is not so far from the way that Isabel and her many visitors — or for that matter Virginia Woolf, if we take her at her word — regard the collections in literary museums: the idea is to reconstruct, in some kind of

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65. Washington Irving, *"Stratford-upon-Avon": from "The Sketchbook of Washington Irving with Notes and Original Illustrations,* ed. Richard Savage and William Salt Brassington (Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare Quiney Press, 1920), 34-35. As quoted in Watson, *The Author's Effects,* 101.
66. Cavell, "The World as Things," 44.

detective work, an image of the writer's self from their belongings. At the same time, though, he also observes: "We have in effect said that every collection requires an idea."[67] This seems to position our interaction with these collections as an act of criticism — a matter for discussion, awaiting uptake and acceptance. It is this possibility that Irving and Morris seem to me to endorse.

To draw this section to a close, consider the following remark by one of the warhorses whose ancestry Cavell traces back to the young American tourist in "The Birthplace":

> If I discover that Shakespeare was not born in the house that we visit today, this is a modification which, obviously, will not alter the functioning of the author's name. But if we proved that Shakespeare did not write those sonnets which pass for his, that would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author's name functions.[68]

To a literary critic in the vein of Foucault's associate Roland Barthes, it would indeed seem obvious that the former discovery would change nothing, while the latter would change much. But, to a curator or perhaps a collector, discoveries like the former would surely be just as important. This in turn makes Foucault's distinction seem a bit too neat and tidy. To say that critics needn't worry about the kinds of discoveries that curators worry about (or conversely) is apt to come across as a pragmatist in the vein of, say, Richard Rorty. Certainly, there are differences between a curator's job and a critic's, but most of us, surely, are capable of entering critical claims and conversations that, on a case-by-case basis, entertain the possibilities suggested by both kinds of discoveries — which need not entail granting them equal weight, but rather, as with Gedge and Irving, involves reflecting on the relation in which we stand (as a culture; as individuals) to the place given (by us as individuals; by us as a culture) to the work of the artist in question.

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67. Ibid., 36.
68. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1991), 106.

4. Thoreau's Cabin; Theseus's Ship; Trigger's Broom

Alert readers of the previous section will no doubt have scoffed at the idea of the Gedges' predecessors replacing the seat of Shakespeare's chair every three years or so. How could the visitor sit on Shakespeare's chair if its seat has been replaced? A previous claimant — the chair endorsed by Garrick as Shakespeare's, which ended up in Poland — was regularly plundered of its struts, spindles, and so on by eager souvenir hunters as the cult of Shakespeare blossomed in the late eighteenth century.[69] They were replaced, to be plundered anew; what was plundered were, of course, parts of Shakespeare's chair, in the same way the replaced seat was part of Shakespeare's chair.

Aficionados of the much-loved British sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* will recognise this situation as "Trigger's broom." Trigger — the Schlemiel of the show, whose every scene involves a joke at his expense — is a roadsweeper who works for the local council. In a legendary episode first aired on Christmas Day 1996, Trigger is proudly sporting a medal awarded to him for saving the council money: he has looked after his broom so well that over the past twenty years he has never had to buy a new broom. On questioning, he reveals the secret of his success: he has replaced the head seventeen times and the handle fourteen times. Another character asks, not unreasonably: "How the hell can it be the same bloody broom then?"[70] Is Trigger's broom Trigger's broom in the same way that Shakespeare's chair is Shakespeare's chair?

Philosophers tend to refer to Trigger's Broom as the Ship of Theseus, after Plutarch's version of the same conundrum. If Theseus's ship is repaired to the point where all the planks and timbers have been replaced, is it still Theseus's ship? Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Hume all ventured their answers to this question. I want to consider it with reference to a slightly different feat of woodwork: Thoreau's cabin.

In *Walden,* Thoreau recounts that the boards with which he made his cabin were purchased, for $4.25, from the shanty of an Irish railway worker named James Collins; the bricks were similarly second-hand; sand from the lakeshore mixed with

69. See Watson, *The Author's Effects*, 97.
70. "Heroes and Villains," dir. Tony Dow, first aired 25 December 1996.

water from the pond gave the bulk of the mortar and plaster; trees from the wood provided much of the rest of the timber; nails and other hardware were purchased separately, the total expenditure amounting to $28.12 — a piece of arithmetic that seems to have impressed Stanley Cavell.[71]

After Thoreau moved out of his cabin, he gave it to Emerson in 1847, who sold it to his gardener. The gardener in turn sold it to two farmers, who moved it to the other side of Concord, where they used it as a granary. In 1868, they dismantled it, cannibalising its roof for an outbuilding, and using the rest of the lumber for scrap.[72]

So, at the time Cavell first published *The Senses of Walden* in 1972, there was no cabin standing at Walden pond. The replica of Thoreau's cabin, conveniently situated near to the car park, first opened to pilgrims in 1985. Prior to that, the site of pilgrimage was just a patch of ground, where the archaeologist Roland Wells Robbins had pinpointed the location of the cabin in 1945, not quite in the exact place we'd been led to believe by Bronson Alcott in 1872.

Robbins went on to develop and manufacture a mass-produced, commercially available, flat pack, self-assembly replica of Thoreau's cabin in the 1960s, and sold it under the strapline: "If it is your wish to live deliberately and make a place in your life to house your dreams, your privacy, or your own personal lifestyle [...] then the Thoreau-Walden cabin is your happy answer."[73] This venture provided the source of the replica cabin that stands today in the Thoreau lyceum. Readers that scoffed at the idea of replacing the seat of Shakespeare's chair might stop laughing when they hear that similar kits can be bought off the internet right now, for less than a thousand dollars. What could be further removed from Thoreau's *Walden* than identical, production-line-manufactured flatpack kits? So what makes one of these constructions a "Thoreau-Walden cabin"? Is it the same thing that makes the broom Trigger's and the chair Shakespeare's?

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71. Thoreau's account of building his house crops up in the unlikeliest of places throughout Cavell's work, as in his discussion of Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), when he is reminded of Thoreau's balance sheet of twenty eight dollars twelve and a half cents by Clark Gable's Peter Warne turning down a fabulous reward for saving Claudette Colbert's Ellie, demanding instead the thirty nine dollars and sixty cents he spent on gasoline.

72. For this information, and in the two paragraphs that follow, I am indebted, as throughout this paper, to the remarkable work of Watson in *The Author's Effects* (see 175-76).

73. Brochure quoted in Donald Linebaugh, "Walden Pond and Beyond," in *The Reconstructed Past: Reconstruction and the Public Interpretation of Archaeology and History*, ed. John H. Jameson (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004), 23.

If there is a difference, then perhaps Cavell can help us pinpoint it. In *Senses of Walden*, he equates Thoreau's labour in building his cabin with the labour of writing his book. "Building a house and [...] writing and reading [...] are allegories and measures of each other," he argues, conflating them to the point that "the building of his habitation (which is to say, the writing of his book) is his present experiment."[74] And indeed, *Walden* itself furnishes us with several metaphors that connect the act of building with the act of writing (Cavell is surely right to argue that Heidegger would approve of this). So we might say that Thoreau's cabin is Thoreau's cabin in the same way as Thoreau's *Walden* is Thoreau's *Walden*: he put it together himself, from the materials he found ready to hand. We think of it as something he made, not as something he owned. Is the cabin, then, part of the collected works of Thoreau? We should not rule this suggestion out too quickly.

Shakespeare's birthplace is a museum that houses a collection of the author's (putative) possessions; Thoreau's cabin is *itself* a collection of the author's (putative) possessions, and not just because he clung to so very few possessions. That is, the itemised list of the cabin's component parts in *Walden* reveals that the cabin is itself a collection: a collection of Collins's boards, Walden's boughs, Thoreau's graft, and so forth. Perhaps this is ironic: in "The World as Things," Cavell calls Thoreau "the philosopher of non-collection,"[75] and surely there are many extracts from *Walden* to back him up:

> I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust.[76]

Yet the irony dissipates somewhat when we read in "The World as Things" of "collections [that] are no longer readable as the work of individuals"[77] — and Thoreau's cabin is just such a collection.

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74. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden,* expanded ed. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 62 and 10.
75. Cavell, "The World as Things," 68.
76. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.
77. Cavell, "The World as Things," 60.

Thoreau's cabin was always more than Thoreau's cabin: it belonged in some measure to others before him, and to others after him too. In this respect, Thoreau's cabin is like Shakespeare's plays: parts of them come from Plutarch and Ovid, or from Holinshed and Chaucer, and parts of them went on to become the building blocks of other writers' plays, films, operas, graphic novels, and so forth. The idea of the text as a "tissue of quotations" is familiar enough, thanks to that warhorse Roland Barthes, but even he might have baulked at the idea of regarding Thoreau's cabin as part of the tissue of Thoreau's collected works.

Hobbes famously asked: if the discarded timbers from Theseus's ship could be gathered together and reassembled, then set alongside the repaired ship, which one would be Theseus's? To which perhaps the commonsense answer is: whichever ship Theseus is on. But if I assemble one of Robbins's Thoreau-Walden cabins, is it Thoreau's cabin — or is it mine? Or is it my copy of Thoreau's cabin? If I buy and read a copy of Thoreau's *Walden*, is it Thoreau's *Walden*, or mine — or is it my copy of Thoreau's *Walden*? These are different questions, and imply different forms of collective ownership. But they are not just playing with words: Shakespeare's chair or Shakespeare's birthplace could not be owned in either of these ways. There is, a Wittgensteinian might say, a grammar of collection here. These questions are a different way of putting the questions with which Cavell ends "The World as Things":

> Why do we put things together as we do? Why do we put ourselves together with just these things to make a world? What choices have we said farewell to? To put things differently, so that they quicken the heart, would demand their recollecting.[78]

In turn, these questions are a different way of putting, or expanding, the question Thoreau asks in *Walden*: "Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?"[79] If Thoreau is the philosopher of non-collection, it is in order to be a philosopher of recollection.

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78. Cavell, "The World as Things," 70.
79. Thoreau, *Walden*, 203.

Most of the theorists whose work on the concept of collection Cavell cites in "The World as Things" regard the act of collecting as removing objects from circulation. But the purpose of assembling a *Collected Works* is to put those works *into* circulation — the same idea as that behind Robbins's mass-produced flatpack cabin. Let us pursue this idea: if the cabin can be detached from its site on Walden Pond and sold *en masse*, or reconstructed near the car park, that differentiates it categorically from the woods in which Thoreau built it, to which we stand in a different relation. So how, for instance, is our relationship to the reconstructed cabin near the car park different from our relationship to Walden Pond?

In what is perhaps the most provocative questioning in *Senses of Walden*, Cavell asks: "Does it matter whether I read, say, *Walden,* or go, say to Walden?"[80] His answer to the latter part of the question seems to be in the negative. "Going to Walden, for example, will not necessarily help you out, for there is no reason to think you will go there and live any differently from the way you are going on now"; "this is fair warning to those of his readers who will be attracted to his life that they will not find it at his Walden, but must work out their own."[81] Would assembling my own copy of his cabin count as doing this? Probably not, or not by itself. Nevertheless, at the end of the book, Cavell asks another pair of questions:

> Does the writer of *Walden* really believe that [...] for example, one could find one's Walden behind a bank counter, or driving a taxi, or guiding a trip hammer, or selling insurance, or teaching school? Granted that one is unlikely to find one's own Walden by roaming around the vicinity of Concord, Massachusetts, isn't it dishonest to suggest that it may be found in any place very different from that?[82]

And Cavell suggests that Thoreau is asking the same questions. As if to underscore the point, Morris Gedge's reaction to the news that he will be leaving his position "in charge of the grey town-library of Blackport-on-Dwindle, all granite, fog and female

80. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 49.
81. Ibid., 70 and 45.
82. Ibid., 110-11.

fiction"[83] in order to take charge of the eponymous Birthplace makes it sound as if he will be decamping to a place very like Thoreau's Walden:

> He felt as if a window had opened into a great green woodland, a woodland that had a name all glorious, immortal, that was peopled with vivid figures, each of them renowned, and that gave out a murmur, deep as the sound of the sea, which was the rustle in forest shade of all the poetry, the beauty, the colour of life.[84]

What attracts Gedge is the idea of a place, not the idea of a collection. "The Birthplace" is replete with the language of pilgrimage; Cavell writes in *Senses of Walden* that "sometimes forget what a land of pilgrims means."[85] This means that we need to recollect it.

Thoreau's cabin was a collection; assembling my own copy of it recollects it. Reading my own copy of Thoreau's *Collected Works* does that too. As it happens, my copy is called *The Portable Thoreau*; his cabin turned out to be portable too. But Walden Pond stays put, neither portable nor collected, and neither Thoreau's nor mine.

5. Seamus Heaney on Wordsworth's Ice-Skates

For Nicola J. Watson, writers' belongings are:

> the material equivalent of the simultaneous irreducibility and incompleteness of the biographical anecdote. [...] All such items-cum-anecdotes thus ultimately function as metonymic stand-ins for the author's presence. They serve as short-circuits between writer and present reader; or rather, they serve as short-circuits between the reader's life and the writer's life. [...] [T]he "natural" discourse of a writer's house museum is overwhelmingly biographical, and with it, realistic. The presumption is that the act of writing

83. James, "The Birthplace," 4.
84. Ibid., 5.
85. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 52.

> can be delimited by describing the site of writing as a density of physical objects. […] But there is and always has been something that threatens to be inconveniently over-material about a writer's house, meaning that the house may not adequately account for writing.[86]

This was certainly Cavell's experience: in "The World as Things," he complains that despite being surrounded by Freud's vast collections of around two thousand ancient statuettes, "It is not easy, in the staid atmosphere of the so-called Freud Museum in London, formed from his residence in London, to imagine what it could be like alone with Freud in his apartment of study and treatment rooms."[87]

From Cavell's disappointment in the Freud Museum, it is just a step to Morris Gedge's attempt to conjure up the spirit of Shakespeare: by visiting his Birthroom alone, after dark, when the museum is empty. Tellingly, Cavell's image of being "alone with Freud in his apartment" — surely a fantasy that itself calls for interpretation — seems starkly opposed to the "civilized" young American's critical slogan "Let the author alone"; it bears out Cavell's suggestion that we *cannot* do so. But the point is the vocabulary that Cavell uses: he describes the experience as a (failed) effort "to imagine what it could be like." Here, he puts his finger on what is so special about collections of writers' belongings — though it is an insight that is buried so deep in "The World as Things" that much of the rest of the discussion obscures it.

Cavell sums up the first subsection of "The World as Things" by observing: "We have in effect said that every collection requires an idea." But the idea by itself is not enough: "This seems to presage the fact, testified to by so many writers on collecting, that collections carry narratives with them, ones presumably telling the point of the gathering, the source and adventure of it."[88] As Watson puts it, the narratives associated with collections of writers' belongings are typically short,

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86. Watson, *The Author's Effects*, 122 and 129.
87. Cavell, "The World as Things," 54. As I have observed, it is not easy to prize apart what is special about a collection of a writer's belongings from what is special about the places they knew. Though unmoved by the collection at the Freud Museum, Cavell *does* seem to have been moved by the power of place: lecturing in the house in Vienna that was Wittgenstein's foray into architecture, his opening remark was "It is wonderful to be here – here in this house that Wittgenstein designed, and in this city that fashioned Wittgenstein." Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 181. Interestingly, all his remarks about pilgrimages to Walden refer to the place: who knows what he would have written had the replica cabin there been built before he wrote *The Senses of Walden*?
88. Cavell, "The World as Things," 36.

fragmentary anecdotes, and their significance lies not, or not typically, in the narrative of how the collection was compiled or assembled, but in the conduit they seem to open up to the absent presence of the writer. Because the writer's *oeuvre* does not "belong" to the collector, and is better thought of as the collective property of the reading public, the significance of a collection of a writer's possessions is constructed by readers (critics of a sort) as much as by curators/collectors. The significance of Freud's collection of statuettes is precisely that it was Freud's. For example: lacking expertise in ancient statuettes, few visitors would ordinarily assume that their own interpretations of a museum's collection of ancient statuettes could outweigh the narrative of the museum curator's interpretation. But readers of Freud have, thanks to their readings of Freud, earned the interpretative right to interpret his collection of ancient statuettes in light of their interpretations of Freud (and conversely), and to use their imaginations in this process: knowledge of a writer seemingly gives us a curator's interpretative privileges in writer's house museums. Perhaps this accounts for the way that, as Woolf put it, "writers stamp themselves upon their possessions more indelibly than other people."[89]

In sum: when Cavell writes that "the idea of a self as a collection requiring a narrative locates the idea that what holds a collection together, specifically perhaps in the aspect of its exhibition, is a narrative of some kind,"[90] he envisages a narrative constructed by the collector or curator. It is a different kind of narrative, or a different experience of narrative, from the experience of a writer's house museum. Here, the significance of the narrative is more visibly, more explicitly constructed by the visitor/reader than by the collector/curator.

A poem of Seamus Heaney's sets out what must surely be a best case for our relationship with collections of authors' artefacts. Contemplating Wordsworth's ice-skates as exhibited for posterity, what inspires Heaney's poem is:

> Not the bootless runners lying toppled
> In dust in a display case,
> Their bindings perished,

89. Woolf, "Great Men's Houses," 23.
90. Cavell, "The World as Things," 46.

> But the reel of them on frozen Windermere
> As he flashed from the clutch of earth along its curve
> And left it scored.[91]

This passage starts out in the kind of detective work Virginia Woolf undertook, seeking out traces of the author from things they once owned, but then combines it with an interpretative act — that is to say, an act of criticism. It imagines Wordsworth's ice-skating as an allegory of writing. The skates scoring the blank white surface of Windermere in a dance (or "reel") that breaks free of it is as clear an image of Wordsworth writing his poetry as Thoreau's hoeing his beans or building his house is of his writing *Walden*. So, Heaney offers us a critical interpretation of Wordsworth, based on a thing Wordsworth owned, and invites us to share it. Thus, Heaney's poem illustrates the "connection between the concept of collecting and that of thinking" discussed in "The World as Things."[92]

Crucially, between the detective work and the critical work lies an imaginative and interpretative leap. The idea is that the experience of seeing a writer's things will inspire an act of imagination which is simultaneously an act of interpretation. Or, in Cavell's words, "to imagine what it could be like," where voicing that act of imagining yields a form of insight or appreciation — a claim of criticism. As Cavell's experience in the Freud Museum demonstrates, we can never be sure whether the fire will catch. Wordsworth's ice-skates, or Shakespeare's chair, or Carlyle's plumbing, might leave us cold. But if they do, then is that because the curators did not frame them in a convincing narrative, or is it because our imaginations are not equal to the task? If it is through our knowledge of Wordsworth's works that we lay claim to the right to interpret his ice-skates, do we not thereby arrogate to ourselves the responsibility if our interpretative powers fall short of Heaney's, and are not up to the task?

Cavell does not explore this issue in much depth. Indeed, the humble visitor or tourist is largely left out of the discussion in "The World as Things." In the twenty years or so that passed between the essay's first publication and its final appearance

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91. Seamus Heaney, "Wordsworth's Skates," in *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 22.
92. Cavell, "The World as Things," 62.

in *Here and There*, this has come to seem like an oversight. Visitors and tourists have become central to the debate: few curators or museologists today would write at such length with such scant mention of the visitor experience. Indeed, Cavell's essay was first published around the time when Nicholas Serota was suggesting that the role of the art gallery was as much to offer visitors an experience as to offer them an interpretation of the collection, and when Julian Spalding was calling for a new "poetic museum" that would "draw out the profounder, more elusive meanings inherent in so many artefacts from our past" through novel, innovative forms of visitor engagement.[93] Once pioneering voices, the overriding importance they attached to how visitors experience museum sites, spaces, and collections has become an orthodoxy. Thus, rereading "The World as Things" upon its republication in *Here and There* in 2022, those with a background in museum studies might find it dated.

Nevertheless, through discussing what is distinctive about writer's house museums and collections of writers' belongings, I hope to have shown that Cavell's thought has much to contribute to these debates. Cavell is seldom thought of as a philosopher of site-specificity — not counting the occasional trip to the Green World of farms in Connecticut — but his writings on Thoreau contemplate the importance of place (and our relation to it) while contemplating our relation to Thoreau's text. Moreover, his discussion of Henry James's "The Birthplace" casts museum visitors as critics, to the extent that their interpretations of the site and collection model the very act of aesthetic criticism itself. The way visitors interpret museums is therefore paramount after all; and that these acts of criticism take their different interpretative paths from different ways of regarding the museum is vital to them. So, in re-collecting "The World as Things," and placing it in new frames of reference, we are prompted to recollect the breadth and insight of Cavell's work — for philosophy, for literature, and for spaces beyond the classroom.

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93. See Nicholas Serota, *Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996) and Julian Spalding, *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2002), 9.