

A black and white photograph of a forest of dead, skeletal trees. The trees are tall and thin, with bare, intricate branches. They are reflected in a calm body of water in the foreground. The background shows a hazy, misty landscape with more trees and a distant mountain range. The overall mood is somber and desolate.

***Conversations 5***

**THE JOURNAL OF CAVELLIAN STUDIES**

***Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies***

**5**

**Date**

2017

**Contributors**

Rastislav Dinić (University of Niš)

Richard Eldridge (Swarthmore College)

Jeff Frank (St. Lawrence University)

Babak Geranfar

Derek Gottlieb (University of Northern Colorado)

Larry Jackson (The New School)

Amir Khan (LNU-MSU College of International Business)

Jon Najarian (Boston University)

Lawrence Rhu (University of South Carolina)

**Managing Editors**

Sérgio Dias Branco (University of Coimbra): [sdiasbranco@fl.uc.pt](mailto:sdiasbranco@fl.uc.pt)

Amir Khan (LNU-MSU College of International Business): [amirazizkhan@missouristate.edu](mailto:amirazizkhan@missouristate.edu)

**Advisory Board**

Sarah Beckwith (Duke University)

Peter Dula (Eastern Mennonite University)

Richard Eldridge (Swarthmore College)

Adam Gonya (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven)

Larry Jackson (The New School)

Andrew Klevan (University of Oxford)

Stephen Mulhall (University of Oxford)

Sianne Ngai (Stanford University)

Andrew Norris (University of California, Santa Barbara)

Lawrence Rhu (University of South Carolina)

D. N. Rodowick (University of Chicago)

Miguel Tamen (University of Lisbon)

**Publisher**

uOttawa Open Access

Morisset Hall

65 University Private

Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5

Canada

**ISSN**

1929-6169

**Website**

<https://uottawa.scholarsportal.info/ojs/index.php/conversations/index>

## Table of Contents

The Aesthetics of Politics and the Politics of Aesthetics In and After Cavell	1
EDITORIAL COMMENT	
Stanley Cavell and the Questioning of the Foregone: Openness to Conversion as a Political Act	4
JEFF FRANK	
Something Must Be Shown: Consent, Conversation, and the End of Reasons	18
DEREK GOTTLIEB	
Seeing Selves and Imagining Others: Aesthetic Interpretation and the Claim to Community in Cavell	35
JON NAJARIAN	
Friend as Enemy: Notes on Cavell and Socialism (Via Makavejev)	54
RASTISLAV DINIĆ	
The Malick Viewed: Is there any Cinematic Heir to Cavell's Philosophical Thinking Today?	70
BABAK GERANFAR	
Reading Silence [excerpt from <i>Skepticism and Redemption: The Political Enactments of Stanley Cavell</i> ]	74
LARRY JACKSON	

End Times According to Stanley Cavell

[a review essay of Larry Jackson's *Skepticism and Redemption:  
The Political Enactments of Stanley Cavell*]

95

AMIR KHAN

Sore Feet in the City of Light

107

Cartesian Auto Body

110

Hamlet 3

115

LAWRENCE RHU

“This Most Human Predicament”: Cavell on Language, Intention, and  
Desire in Shakespeare

118

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

# The Aesthetics of Politics and the Politics of Aesthetics In and After Cavell

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Politics seems bound up with questions of the ordinary and everyday as opposed to the extraordinary. This may be a Cavellian way of articulating the problem of political praxis, i.e., the point at which theory becomes action, but notice, at least in Cavell-speak, which way the trajectory flows. The Wittgensteinian charge to bring language back from holiday could be construed as a search for political or real-world praxis but not at the point where theory *becomes* action, but where theory is, in a sense, forgone or put on hiatus for the sake of action.

Yet how to prescribe such a hiatus or forgoing, say, theoretically? The banal charge to “simply do,” or to say, “this is simply what I do,” seems not much better. These essays wrestle with such issues. We have gathered them here, for the sake of coherence, under the thematic moniker of “politics,” as our call for papers explicitly solicited explorations of Cavell and the Aesthetization of Politics. The contributions, nonetheless, are broad and eclectic and address politics and praxis from a number of angles.

The first three explore the pedagogical take-aways of Stanley’s writings on education. Jeff Frank stresses the importance not of teaching students to remain inquisitive about subjects considered “foregone” (i.e., why is there inequality in the world?) but of teaching teachers to teach students to remain inquisitive—to have teachers face, in a sense, the crisis of skepticism bred not only by the existence of injustice in the world, but the hollowness of language. To Frank, “an educator welcomes the moment [of crisis] as an opportunity to grow: to make the school—and our society—more humane, more educative, more just.”

Derek Gottlieb further explores scenes of instruction, or, rather, *post*-scenes of instruction, i.e., the moment after spades are turned and bedrock is hit. If incom-

prehensibility follows, Gottlieb reminds us, something *has* happened, been revealed, even if the moment fails. That action must follow because we have reached the limits of language or the ineptness of intellection denies this knowledge. Political action begins with or from a sense of crisis, and this Cavellian revelation is not a bulwark or inhibitor to political action but a useful precursor—indicative, in other words, of Ranciere’s “active intervention” and *patager*.

Jon Najarian equally forcefully extends the idea that Cavell’s philosophy is not solely interested in ideas of aesthetics, eschewing politics; rather, Cavell seeks to do what Benjamin did from the other way around. Rather than politicizing aesthetics by articulating one’s politics first, Cavell seeks instead to understand the nature of aesthetic experiences and judgments as a basis for understanding how politics happens.

Rastislav Dinić, who is making headway as a scholar isolating Cavellian themes in the films of Dušan Makavejev, adds a socialist tint to Cavellian praxis; that such a tint exists in Cavell’s writings may indeed be apparent, if not readily or easily articulated. The same could be said of Heidegger, and the intersection of Cavell, Heidegger, and Cavell’s famous pupil protégé Terence Malick is touched upon in a brief excursus by Babak Geranfar.

We are also delighted to run an excerpt of Larry Jackson’s illuminating secondary treatment of Cavell’s oeuvre. The first of seven chapters follows here, along with a review essay of the entire work.

We wind down with some poetry by Larry Rhu, a dear friend of the journal whose eye and ear for language, Cavellian and otherwise, lucidly puts forward themes of American exceptionalism gone awry or spent, hence of philosophical promise wasted; dreams of a grandfather and a Heideggerian “thrownness”—into the autobody of a car or mind, or onto the American West—remain. Lastly, Richard Eldridge shares some of his meditations on the Cavellian valences of so-called “character criticism” in Shakespeare studies. To deny that Shakespeare’s characters can be read as actual human beings (via “impressionistic encounters”) necessitates forgoing a plenitude of significance latent in human speech. If we cannot exactly say that Shakespeare’s tragic characters are human beings, the dramatist’s chief power is to capture the breadth and scope of a form of life, not exactly biological, but in a way, organic.

A last(ing) note on Stanley Bates passing on December 10. In the saying of Victor Nuovo, his colleague at Middlebury College,

Stanley was a philosopher not only by profession, but in the whole of his being: his mind was open and tirelessly curious, never dogmatic, always careful in forming his opinions, always ready to revise them, and he was relentless in the search for truth.

About his work we can write the same as he wrote on Cavell's: his "works on [...] various-seeming topics possess a deep unity—one might say the unity of a life."<sup>1</sup> We find a deep agreement of principle between these philosophers in a well-known passage from Thoreau's *Walden*, an inspiration to both Stanleys: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live."<sup>2</sup> To live one's philosophy is something Bates embraced. Such sentiment still inspires readers and contributors in the conversations of this journal, a project Bates was enthusiastic about. He did not hesitate, for example, to accept our invitation to sit on our inaugural Advisory Board; *Conversations* continues to be guided by his spirit and generosity.

With all best wishes,

SÉRGIO AND AMIR

---

1. Stanley Bates, "Stanley Cavell and Ethics," in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17.

2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 14.

# Stanley Cavell and the Questioning of the Foregone: Openness to Conversion as a Political Act

JEFF FRANK

This paper makes the case that Stanley Cavell's thinking on conversion, developed in "Normal and Natural" in *The Claim of Reason*, offers resources that can be used to develop a politics that acknowledges the importance of learning from the voice of skepticism instead of seeking to silence the skeptic through the pursuit of policies and practices that promise a type of certainty that will forever silence skepticism. I develop this case from my position as a teacher educator who knows very well the desire to silence skepticism in the form of finding a way of teaching future teachers so that I/we can be certain that they will be effective and engaging educators after graduation. Giving up the belief that we can achieve certainty when it comes to teacher preparation does not consign us to hopelessness, but it does suggest that teacher educators may have more to learn from listening to the voice of skepticism than is suggested by current discourses in teacher education. Though I write from the position of a teacher educator and my examples are drawn from the work of teacher education, the main goal of this paper is to develop a reading of "Normal and Natural" that may help us appreciate new dimensions of the political implications of Cavell's work.

§

Public school teaching in the United States is highly-regulated. Programs of teacher education must be accredited, students seeking certification must meet many requirements, including—but certainly not limited to—multiple and varied standardized

exams, and once teachers begin teaching, their performance will be assessed by administrators, often using the results of student scores on standardized tests to determine effectiveness of teaching. Yet, for all this regulation, for all this oversight, how many of us have been in classrooms or heard about a teacher and wondered: How is this person teaching? How did this person meet every professional standard we have set, and yet cannot educate children effectively and humanely?

These questions can give rise to a skepticism about the efficacy of regulating the human act of educating. And, this skepticism—as Stanley Cavell teaches—can go in at least two directions. The first—call it the most easily recognized as a political direction—denies skepticism with the promise of more certainty. That is, we can seek better regulations to ensure better teachers entering classrooms, or we can give up the very idea of regulating teaching altogether. These responses strike me as dominant poles of political discussion in educational policy. One group seeks better regulation, while the other questions the very idea of regulations. What neither group seems to appreciate is that the voice of skepticism will not be quieted with more—or no—regulation. We will be cast imaginatively back into the classroom, left wondering: How do we get good teachers in front of children?

More regulations, less regulations, we have schools and students attend them. It seems important to acknowledge that there will be teachers teaching and students subjected to that teaching, and so we will never have silence: being concerned with the improvement of education is our fate. In education, we are fated to questions of improvement so long as we are concerned about the education of children and its implications.

The seeming unavailability of asking about improvement in education leads me to feel that we should try to develop a politics that doesn't deny—through the quest for certainty—the inescapability of questioning our educational practices—as if more, or different, or no regulations can ever be enough—but works in acknowledgement of it. Though Cavell's thinking is not political in the sense that it will help us pick sides in the regulation/deregulation debate (or debates like it), it reminds us that even when we realize our better policies (no, more, better regulations), there will be a remainder. The voice of skepticism remains, asking: How do we *really* know that we are better off with this new policy? How do we know that students will turn out better now that we've

made these changes? Instead of silencing these questions, we must acknowledge their force and the limitations of even our best attempts at working to improve the human act of educating. More, we can come to see the importance of asserting this remainder as a political act. Instead of seeking policies and practices that will silence the voice of skepticism, we can give it play: learning what it might mean to educate in acknowledgement of the limitations of even our best thinking and our best policies.

As a teacher educator, this acknowledgement is unsettling. Students need good teachers, teaching well is hard, and instead of succumbing to the voice of skepticism, I need to use the very limited time I have with students to teach them what we—as a community of educators and educational researchers—know about good teaching. Schools of education and teacher educators like myself need to prepare teachers who can *enact*, in very concrete ways and in diverse contexts of learning, the concepts and ideals that lead to effective teaching.<sup>1</sup> We don't have time for skepticism; what we need are better and more effective practices that can be taught to teachers. But—as I will develop below—this effort to silence skepticism, though motivated by a desire to produce effective teachers, will often keep us from realizing this aim, because there will always be moments in our lives as teachers where what is needed are not new or improved practices, but a change of heart.

To begin getting at what I mean by a change of heart, consider an example, one too common in schools. It is deeply difficult—if not impossible—to teach a child when she does not trust us, or because she has learned to distrust authority figures. Changing teaching practices will not provide a response that will make a difference to that child. Instead of looking to practices—skills, strategies, techniques—for solutions, we are thrown back upon ourselves, left wondering if anything at all will work. More, we may come to wonder how it is that these practices ever work for any child, seeing how they can fail to reach this student who stands in need right now. We turn away from the quest for solutions, seeing how even the best strategy can so quickly leave us wanting, and we thus re-open ourselves to the voice of skepticism.

---

1. The concept of *enactment* is an important one in teacher education literature. For excellent starting places into this conversation, see: Mary M. Kennedy, "The Role of Preservice Teacher Education," in *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Teaching and Policy*, ed. Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999) and Pam Grossman, Morva McDonald, Karen Hammerness, Matthew Ronfeldt, "Dismantling Dichotomies in Teacher Education," in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, ed. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Sharon Feiman-Nemser, D. John McIntyre, Kelly E. Demers (New York: Routledge, 2008).

There are too few resources in educational literatures to help us learn from the voice of skepticism, and for this reason, I see the section “Normal and Natural” from Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* as a greatly underappreciated resource for teaching.<sup>2</sup> Though this section will not help us find our way in teacher education discussions as they are presently framed, I find “Normal and Natural” to be a text that offers a deeply important and much needed vision for the work of teaching and teacher education. And, as all work in teacher education is inherently political, given—at the very least—its ties to regulation and how often it is made the object of political discussion,<sup>3</sup> I see Cavell offering us a politics—though one not normally seen as such given its lack of a direct tie to present policies or practices—for teacher education that we need, especially when we open ourselves to the voice of skepticism.

A central theme of “Normal and Natural” is Cavell’s thinking about how the process of becoming educated leads us to accept many things as normal or natural; foregone conclusions not open to question. Cavell begins with Wittgenstein’s example of teaching a child to continue a series. We judge teaching a success when the child successfully completes the series as *we* would, when, for the child, “the continuity is a matter of course, a *foregone* conclusion.”<sup>4</sup> Much is accomplished when the young continue as we do, when their reactions are the same as ours—this is pain, this is what it means to count, this is being in love—but, the accomplishment also comes at a cost. Although it is important that another person recognizes my wince as a sign that I am in pain, the fact that my pain can be almost instantly recognized as such can cause me to worry—to echo Wittgenstein—that this instant public recognition can somehow take away from my pain being *mine*. If something so seemingly personal as my pain is not wholly mine, at least mine in the ways I took it to be, then what else follows? Why do I/we call this a painting? Why do I/we call this school? Why do I/we value the things we do in the ways we do?

The problem with asking these questions is that, if our education has been successful, it is not as if I can simply decide to change the way I inhabit my world. As

---

2. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111-25.

3. For a brief and insightful overview, see Marilyn Cochran-Smith, “The Politics of Teacher Education and the Curse of Complexity,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 56.3 (2005): 181-185.

4. *Ibid.*, 122.

Cavell writes, “I cannot *decide* what I take as a matter of course.”<sup>5</sup> I begin to feel that my education goes all the way down. Before I was fully conscious of being formed, I am formed. And, once I realize that, much is foregone; so much so that I can begin to wonder where my judgments begin and where convention stops. I can worry that I do not judge, I simply do—and see, and feel, and respond—as *we* do. I can’t get behind those judgments to question them, I am caught by conformity and do not know how to reanimate my life or my ways of expressing my life as *mine*.<sup>6</sup> Here is how Cavell puts it:

I may feel that my foregone conclusions were never conclusions *I* have arrived at, but were merely imbibed by me, merely conventional. I may blunt that realization through hypocrisy or cynicism or bullying. But I may take the occasion to throw myself back upon my culture, and ask why we do what we do, judge as we judge, how we have arrived at these crossroads.<sup>7</sup>

This is a key moment, and a political one. If I decide to throw myself back upon my culture, then I can begin to wonder why “we do what we do, judge as we judge” and think about the education that has brought me to “these crossroads.”

As we ask questions about *our* ways of doing things, and whether I assent to them, we are cast back to scenes of instruction, the education that has led us to these crossroads and that mark our culture. We are forced to consider how much of what we call education is marked by “hypocrisy or cynicism or bullying,” especially when our elders, or the elder we are now, are confronted with questions—the questions of youth and adolescence—that threaten to bring *our* ways into question. As we skate along the grooves of the foregone and expect the child to follow, we may be brought up short by a question. As Cavell writes, “if the child, little or big, asks me: Why do we eat animals? or Why are some people poor and others rich? or Why do I have to go to school? or Do you love black people as much as white people?...I may find my

---

5. *Ibid.*, 122-123.

6. Here is where I see Cavell as such a deeply insightful reader of the voices of Wittgenstein’s *Investigation* that express exasperation and fear that *my* pain is somehow not my own. This isn’t just a problem of epistemology, it goes to the very root of my being-in-the-world.

7. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.

answers thin, I may feel run out of reasons without being willing to say “This is what I do” (what I say, what I sense, what I know), and honor that.”<sup>8</sup>

We can replay the questions we asked as children, and we can replay the questions children ask us. I can replay these questions as a way of connecting me to what our educations have formed, I can use these questions as an “occasion to go over the ground I hitherto thought foregone.”<sup>9</sup> Is it a foregone conclusion that our society must be marked by inequality? What would it mean to call my “natural” reactions to the existence of inequality—or racism, or sexism—into question? Instead of seeing *our* ways as wholly natural, we can begin to listen more to the questions of childhood, responding with openness, not cynicism, bullying or fear. This listening to the questions of childhood strikes me as one of the most important political implications of Cavell’s work for teaching and working with future teachers. As much as we can prepare future teachers to anticipate the limitations of our way of life as it currently stands—for example, teaching about white privilege, teaching about cis privilege—new questions will inevitably arise, and we need to prepare future teachers for this reality. Instead of taking unforeseen questions as a threat or an affront, teachers can respond to these questions as opportunities; an “occasion to throw [themselves] back upon [their] culture.” The voice of skepticism offers a political education where teachers see the good of throwing themselves against their own enculturation as teachers, and the culture of schooling that they find themselves in.

Cavell is deeply instructive here. He writes: “Why do we take it that because we then must put away childish things, we must put away the prospect of growth and the memory of childhood? The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups this is not natural growth, but *change*. Conversion is a turning of our natural reactions; so it is symbolized as rebirth.”<sup>10</sup> An educator must stand open to the need for conversion and rebirth, and this conversion is not necessarily brought about by anything that she learns in her teacher education, but it is occasioned by “the prospect of growth and the memory of childhood.” Both are worth fuller attention. First, the prospect of growth is something that should be much more central to learning to teach than it currently is. Anyone entering the complex work of

---

8. *Ibid.*, 125.

9. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

10. *Ibid.*, 125.

teaching will seek some certainty, especially when it comes to the very real challenges of effectively managing a classroom for learning. That is, she will want to have certain things “figured out” before teaching. But, this desire for a way of being in the classroom that allows for order and effectiveness (to take two things most new teachers worry about) should not harden into the fixity of the one and only routine, or the lesson that works and never invites revision. Rather, the prospect of a life of teaching should be one premised on the promise of continuous growth.<sup>11</sup> One’s subject is always changing, one’s students are always changing, the context of school and society are always changing, and the educator is the one who learns through change, not in avoidance of it. Though one may have never imagined—say, as a public educator in North Carolina—that the bathrooms in a school would be charged with the significance they have at our moment in history, an educator welcomes the moment as an opportunity to grow: to make the school—and our society—more humane, more educative, more just.

It is hard to know just how a future teacher can be prepared for this openness to growth, but I find Cavell’s thinking on the artist as deeply suggestive. Cavell writes, “Artists are people who know how to do such things, i.e., how to make objects in response to which we are enabled, but also fated, to explore and educate and enjoy and chastise our capacities as they stand.”<sup>12</sup> Again, it is important to prepare students to think about and respond to the issues and politics of the moment, but the issues and politics that consume the culture at the start of a teacher’s career will likely be very different as she grows into her work. For this reason, it is important that future teachers see the need to be responsive to questions beyond the options that are on offer by society as it presently stands. Instead of looking to what we teachers know to be solutions to the problems we face in the classroom, we may need to look elsewhere. The ways in which we’ve been educated—as teachers—to see certain behaviors or outcomes as foregone, may be a commentary on the limitations of our teaching practices, and not necessarily an accurate depiction of what is possible or desirable. For this reason, Cavell asks that we let our responsiveness be educated broadly, especially by things like the arts. Teachers need to

---

11. Here I use growth in much the same way that John Dewey does. On growth, Cavell and Dewey may be closer than Cavell may be ready to concede, though it would take a separate paper to develop this point. Outside of Cavell’s own discussion of Dewey—especially in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1991)—I find Philip Jackson’s discussion in *John Dewey and the Philosopher’s Task* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002) particularly useful in relation to educational themes of this paper.

12. *Ibid.*, 123.

experience art “in response to which we are enabled, but also fated, to explore and educate and enjoy and chastise our capacities as they stand.”

As someone who knows the very real pressure to teach a student in ways that will effectively prepare her for her first year of teaching, it sounds fanciful—at best—to suggest that students should engage with art if she wants to prepare for a life of teaching. At the same time, I cannot deny that I would not be the teacher I am if I didn’t have the experience of attempting to let art—broadly understood—educate my responsiveness to the world.<sup>13</sup> Art can create a space of play where what appears fixed in society is made to move. Though the world may feel just as fixed when I am done reading or experiencing the art, somehow the sense of motion—the energies unleashed by the art—empower us to keep asking questions and not be put off by the cynicism or the bullying of elders who would preserve our ways, even if these ways are not educative, just, or life-giving.

I appreciate that Cavell shows us that “we are enabled, but also fated” to ask questions when moved by art. Art opens possibilities, but we are also fated to see those possibilities whenever a child asks us: “Why do I have to ask permission to use the bathroom? Why are only some children good at math (in your classroom)?” We are fated to think the questions with the students, we cannot “put the pupil out of sight—as though his intellectual reactions are disgusting to me,”<sup>14</sup> we are cast into moments of decision where we can continue running our classroom along the groove of what is done, or seek change, growth, conversion. Our best practices come to an end—our teacherly spade is turned—and we must find our way forward, trying to create a way of being together in the classroom that avoids what is deadening in favor of possibilities for growth. Making the attempt to break with the foregone is difficult, and Cavell is right—I feel—to liken it to a rebirth. Our classroom, who we are in the classroom, who our students can become in the classroom are different if we make the move to go against, or resist, the foregone.

Just as we shouldn’t put away the “prospect of growth” if we want to be effecti-

---

13. I see much of Cora Diamond’s work on the moral life to be about literature’s ability to educate our responsiveness to the world. For two examples, see “Henry James, Moral Philosophers, Moralism,” *The Henry James Review* 18.3 (1997): 243-257 and “Losing Your Concepts,” *Ethics* 98.2 (1988): 255-277. For a discussion of this work as it relates to education, see Megan Laverty, “Learning Our Concepts,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43.1 (2009): 27-40.

14. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 125.

ve educators, Cavell calls us to remain in touch with “the memory of childhood.”<sup>15</sup> I teach students who plan to become secondary teachers, so I would include the memory of adolescence with the memory of childhood. The educator, of all people, needs to remember, needs to be in touch with, the feelings of resistance, the longing for connection, the willingness to question, the acceptance and fear of difference, the deep hurt of a felt injustice—and much else—that mark childhood and adolescence.<sup>16</sup> By maintaining touch with these, the educator will be less apt to feel threatened by a child’s questioning, and more willing to learn from and with the questioning. This, again, will allow us to resist the foregone, thereby remaining receptive to the possibilities of what Cavell calls conversion or rebirth.<sup>17</sup> Cora Diamond describes the need for conversion or rebirth—in relation to her reading of *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens—this way:

We all know that we were once children, but that may be mere abstract knowledge, incapable of entering our adult lives. Or it may be imaginatively available to us; the acceptance of our own past childhood may be imaginatively present and active in us as adults. Without the imaginative presence in us of the child we were, we are as adults incapable, Dickens thought, of enjoyment and hope, and that cripples us morally.<sup>18</sup>

The sense of being crippled morally makes a great deal of sense to me in relation to teaching. When a teacher puts herself outside the realm of childhood and adolescence, as if the deep concerns and feelings she felt as a child were mere abstract knowledge, she ceases to be responsive to the life of, to what is alive to, her own students. In this situation, when the teacher is at a remove from what is living in her classroom, what is necessary is not new practices, but a change of heart.

We might—following Cavell’s fondness for troping images from the Bible in a

---

15. For a beautifully moving discussion of being in touch with childhood, see: Cora Diamond, “The Importance of Being Human,” in *Human Being*, ed. David Cockburn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

16. For a beautiful discussion of remembering in teaching, see David Hansen, “A Poetics of Teaching,” *Educational Theory* 54.2 (2004), esp. 142.

17. Though it would be impossible to pursue this line of thinking here, there are interesting connections between rebirth as used in *The Claim of Reason* and Cavell’s thinking on remarriage, see: *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

18. Diamond, “Being Human,” 42.

way reminiscent of someone like Emerson<sup>19</sup>—think of conversion for an educator in terms of pouring new wine into old skins. That is, the best in-service training, or book on pedagogy or workshop will have next to no impact on the teacher whose memory of childhood is not “imaginatively available.” By contrast, the teacher who remembers childhood, might not need these practices or training, because she can play the classroom by ear, figuring out—finding, founding—modes of responsiveness as she goes along. I see something like this happening when I read the moving and artistic work of Vivian Paley, a writer and early childhood educator who models what it means to resist the foregone conclusion and learn to listen to, to get closer to, the worlds of children.<sup>20</sup> Hers is representative of the aversive effort: turning away from mere conformity—turning away from the conventionality of what *we* do—and to what the world is trying to teach. More, Paley acts on what she learns. When she learns—for example—the expansiveness of exclusion and its long-lasting effects that happen in classrooms under the banner of the common phrase, “You can’t play with us,” she enacts a new rule in her classroom: “You can’t say you can’t play.”<sup>21</sup> Where most parents, educators—and even the students themselves—see it as natural that some children are not allowed to play, while other children are, Paley—through responsiveness to the life of her classroom—sees this so-taken natural act as the exclusionary practice it is. Though this classroom rule and practice may seem like a minor thing, I take it to be representative of openness to conversion, and hence a political act. Teacher writers like Paley demonstrate that listening well to children and responding to what one learns can be a political act, though it may not ever be recognized as such given the terms we’ve been taught to talk about politics as it relates to teaching and education.

Teacher writers like Paley demonstrate how Cavell’s politics of resisting the foregone help make us more present to our students. In addition to being open and receptive to their questions and their questioning of what we’ve taken as foregone, we become open and receptive to who they are and how they’ve internalized their place in the foregone order. This openness, this receptiveness is deeply important, and has

---

19. On troping, see Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature* (New York: Random House, 1987). Cavell’s use of religious language can be seen in “childish things” as quoted above and will be explored briefly below with relation to turning the other cheek.

20. A good starting place may be her *White Teacher* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) or *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

21. Vivian Paley, *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

—though this way of stating it seems to risk something like overstatement—the power to transform lives and the foundations of educational practices. We can see this transformative power most clearly when Cavell discusses the child who *we* see as disgusting until one adult does not recognize the child as *we* do. Cavell writes:

Sometimes a stranger does not find the child disgusting when the child's parents do. Sometimes the stranger is a doctor and teaches the child something new in his acceptance of him. This is not accomplished by his growing *accustomed* to the disgusting creature. It is a *refusing* of foregone reaction; offering the other cheek.<sup>22</sup>

At least two points are worth noting. First, it is important that the stranger does not grow accustomed to the child and thus come to learn that the child is not disgusting. Rather, the stranger refuses the foregone reaction; the child is not disgusting, it is the criteria that force us into this conclusion that are disgusting and stand in need of reformation. Here is a key point for teachers and teacher educators to remain mindful of. When working with students we can—and often should—refuse the foregone reaction. No student is bad at math—or English, or science—just as no child is irredeemable—or disruptive, or any other label that becomes convenient for educators but fateful for the child—and teachers must risk the possibilities of learning when she acknowledges that the child is not her label and so discover—through the conversion of human responsiveness through contact with the living child—how to be with and educate the child.

The second point to highlight is Cavell's use of offering the other cheek. It is important to appreciate the full weight of what Cavell is calling for. In a fascinating reading of the parable of the good Samaritan, Ivan Illich makes the case that one of the lessons of the good Samaritan story is that we are called to love whoever is in front of us calling for our love.<sup>23</sup> This offers a radical break with ethics based on obligations to *our* group—fellow adherents of *our* religion or citizens of *our* nation—or an

---

22. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 124.

23. See: Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005). For an interesting gloss of Illich's reading, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 737ff.

ethics based on obligations to *our* principles—the Law tells us we do X in situation Y—and opens us to a new way of being that calls us to learn what it means to respond with love whenever our love is called on. Now, I am not making the case that Cavell is a Christian writer in the way that Illich is, but I think Cavell would find something important in how Illich sees the good Samaritan parable as offering this type of radical break with how *we* do things and endorse its transformative power. Instead of relying on how *we* do things or relying on *our* principles, we are called to offer the other cheek, to see what it might mean to not go on as *we* do, to discover the possibilities that emerge and open when we forego the foregone conclusion and try to respond to the life in front of us.

I feel like I've taken us far afield from the discussion of teacher education regulations with which we started, but this is exactly why I find Cavell's thinking important for teaching and teacher education. Even as I prepare my students to do well on their edTPA exam<sup>24</sup> so they can become certified teachers and as I work to make sure they can implement best practices in their classrooms and lesson planning,<sup>25</sup> I also attempt to teach in acknowledgement that it is important—especially as an educator—to turn the other cheek so that we turn toward the preciousness of each student, each moment.<sup>26</sup> Even if something like turning the other cheek cannot be directly taught in the space of a teacher education program, it is important that we not let talk of best practices be the end of the story, as if one won't find oneself called to conversion and need to answer that call if one is to remain a good teacher by one's own lights. For this reason, in teacher education we need to empower self-trust and not give the impression that we are all-knowing and that knowingness is the goal, or result, of a life of teaching. We need to respond to the questions of our own students in ways that let them know that we don't know everything—no one can—about the human act of educating, and so we must often fall back on nothing more—though

---

24. A \$300 exam—one of many—that my students must take and pass before they can become public school teachers in New York. For a brief overview, see Raymond L. Pecheone and Andrea Whittaker, "Well-Prepared Teachers Inspire Student Learning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 97.7 (2016): 8-13. For a look at its predictive validity, see: Dan Goldhaber, James Cowan, and Roddy Theobald, "Evaluating Prospective Teachers: Testing the Predictive Validity of the edTPA," *Journal of Teacher Education* 68.4 (2017): 377-393.

25. For example, differentiated instruction, understanding by design and restorative justice instead of punitive classroom discipline.

26. The use of preciousness may be, well, too precious, but I use it because I think Raimond Gaita is correct to hold that this is the term that best captures our full human responsiveness to the other. See: Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 5.

nothing less—than our fullest responsiveness to the present moment. Instead of falling back on our way as *the* way—through bullying, cynicism, or righteous certainty—we can live the questions we can't yet answer, trusting that not following the foregone conclusion is our better hope, even if it is a hope that doesn't offer any promise of success.

In a way, it is up to the teacher educator to be representative of this way of living.<sup>27</sup> Our politics will have to be one of remaining open to conversion through resisting and questioning the foregone conclusion. We must remain present to the questions of the child and the adolescent—Does this work really prepare me for anything other than more school? Why do adults seem so uninterested in the world? Am I worthy of love?—and let the questions educate our responsiveness to the world. Though this work may not feel as politically efficacious as protesting educational policies or advocating for practices we feel are more effective than the ones we have, it doesn't mean it should be denigrated out of existence, or seen as a- or nonpolitical. Choosing to remain open to conversion is indeed political, and freeing a child to see herself as the eyes of love see her—not as disgusting, or stupid, or ugly—though not politics in any major key, is nonetheless transformative and needful. This is what I take to be Cavell's call to educators especially, and one I think deserves far more attention than we give it.

It is easy to get pulled into the world of adulthood, where it feels like we should only talk of serious things and put away all that is childish or reminds us of childhood, but it is just this reminder that we may need if we are to make schools more humane, more just, more educative. The teacher teaches children, not foregone conclusions in a world where possibilities are fixed and locked in place. Cavell's thinking shows us that there is far more play in the world, and we should join children in exploring possibilities that offer the hope of growth and conversion: "This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. It is also the description of something we might call education."<sup>28</sup> We teachers and teacher educators should wonder: Can education become philosophy and still recognize itself? I think we can only respond

---

27. For Cavell on the representative, see *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, esp. 31. For a discussion of this aspect of Cavell's thought, see Jeff Frank, "The Claims of Documentary," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45.10 (2013): 1018-1027.

28. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 125.

to this question by thinking with children as they question the limits of our foregone conclusions, and always stand ready to leave even our best practices behind when we find them wanting. This process of learning how to be free from the foregone through human responsiveness needs to be one of the main goals of becoming a teacher, and though preparing for this work may not fit what *we* currently take to be teacher education, this is no reason to silence Cavell's claim on our attention as we—as a culture and as educators—educate future teachers.

# Something Must Be Shown: Consent, Conversation, and the End of Reasons

DEREK GOTTLIEB

This essay attempts to respond to what I see as a persistent misunderstanding of Cavellian conversation and its relation to politics as such. More specifically, I find that critics of Cavell and his acolytes, such as Davide Panagia, tend to read a Cavellian politics as dependent on a conventional sort of judgment, such that Cavell's idea of "conversation" is overly similar to Habermas's notion of exercising "public reason" or a more general social contractarianism. Panagia specifically contrasts a Cavellian politics with Rancière's more actively participatory variety. Without wanting to dwell overmuch on Rancière specifically, I wish to argue that this contrast is overblown to the extent that it underestimates the stakes and confrontational nature of Cavellian conversation, and that it ignores Cavell's own account of what happens when justifications come to an end and one's spade is turned: something must be shown. I wish to link the kind of showing that I think Cavell has in mind to the long tradition of African American activism in the United States, culminating, thus far, in the Movement for Black Lives.

## Panagia, Zerilli, and Cavell

In his new book, *Rancière's Sentiments*, Davide Panagia uses Linda Zerilli as a Cavellian foil against which to position Rancière's active politics of *partager*. My purpose in this opening section will be to show that Panagia misreads Zerilli's sense of "judgment," and that—properly understood—the notion of judgment that Zerilli and Cavell develop is much closer to Rancière than Panagia allows.

As Panagia defines Rancière's core concept, *partager* is part-taking specifically by those who have no-part, who have no (recognized) role in politics:

They act by taking part in an activity that does not belong to them and that they have not been tasked to do. And they don't spend their time making or justifying arguments to one another, or to others, because their doings are improper and any reason they may give for their actions is de facto illegitimate.<sup>1</sup>

His specification of what *partager* is *not* doing—justifying arguments by giving reasons—is meant to signal the contrast with the view he attributes to Zerilli.

Citing Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* and *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, Panagia declares that Zerilli is fatally committed to “consensus theories of democratic representation” rooted in members’ “having to sign on to a common set of conditions,” which unwarrantedly narrows the sphere of the politically possible. He notes that “such accounts [...] demand capacities like judgment and attention of their agents and presume that a capacity for judgment (and thus a particular account of intelligence) is necessary for politics.”<sup>2</sup> On Panagia's view, then, Zerilli stands in a long line of social-contractarian political thinkers, for whom political activity mainly consists in exchanging reasons with others who have also “signed on” to certain conditions, all with the aim of persuading those others to adopt this or that view of a particular topic. This sort of politics is so far from Rancière's sense of *partager* that Panagia finds Zerilli's alignment of Cavell and Arendt with Rancière galling. But the view Panagia attributes to Zerilli is not, in fact, Zerilli's.

To see this, it is worth quoting Panagia's reading of Zerilli on judgment and criteria in full.

Placing Rancière alongside Cavell and Arendt, [Zerilli] affirms, “Aesthetic and political judgments, in which there is no concept to be applied, raise the question of criteria in an acute way, for saying what counts involves something other than the activity of subsumption. Unique to such judgments is that the

---

1. Davide Panagia, *Rancière's Sentiments* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), x.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

subject does not recall the grounds upon which things can be rightly judged, but is called upon to elicit, in relation to specific interlocutors, the criteria appropriate to the particular at hand.”<sup>3</sup>

In this quoted passage, Zerilli is establishing what she understands as a similarity between a Cavellian-Arendtian position and Rancière’s view, a similarity centered upon the way in which publicly raising “criteria” is a means of asserting “what counts” in a particular situation. This criterial recounting, she says, is specifically oriented toward “something other than the activity of subsumption.” Panagia seems to misunderstand this point, as is evident from his exegesis of the passage:

Like Arendt (via Cavell), Zerilli wants to extend Kant’s claim... that aesthetic experience solicits a sense of freedom and that that sense of freedom arises from the experience of ungroundedness that emerges from one’s encounter with an object of taste. The absence of a concept that might be applied to that particular moment of experience with an object raises the possibility of a criteria-less condition of coexistence between individuals. The result for Zerilli is a calling upon the subject of experience to be responsive to the experience by eliciting criteria that acknowledge the moment of ungroundedness. And this “being called upon to elicit criteria” is an important dimension of politics and—especially—of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

This interpretation misreads Zerilli in two important ways, both of which undermine the similarity she wishes to draw out between Rancière’s project and her own. The first misreading involves Zerilli’s sense of what elicits “criteria.”

Panagia’s version of the Zerilli passage pictures an isolated subject facing off against an un-subsumable experience, forced by that experience to select criteria by which to comprehend it, and thus to acknowledge the ungroundedness implicit in the choice of criteria. This is not Rancière, says Panagia: “politics isn’t about being called upon to elicit criteria for counting; it is about the *making* count, regardless of

---

3. Ibid., x.

4. Ibid., x.

whether or not that activity is persuasive to others”<sup>5</sup> But by centering the isolated “subject of experience” in his reading, Panagia ignores Zerilli’s “specific interlocutors” that, for her, do the eliciting, and he thus misses the way in which recounting criteria might *be* a means of “*making count*.”

For Zerilli, the presence of those interlocutor is of seminal importance. It is the triangular relation among the person, the particular, and the interlocutor that in fact elicits the criteria—there is a disagreement of some kind over *what* this particular is, and it is the specific nature of that disagreement that requires either person involved to *show* the other that the particular *is* the kind of thing that it *is*. Thus the import of the difference between what Zerilli says—criteria are elicited “in relation to specific interlocutors”—and what Panagia hears: eliciting criteria is responsive to [an] experience.

Panagia’s second (and related) misreading involves the *purpose* of eliciting criteria. Where Panagia emphasizes Kantian “freedom” and “acknowledg[ing] the moment of ungroundedness,” this bears little relation to any passage in Zerilli. And the thrust of Zerilli’s argument surely cannot be aimed at “the possibility of a criteria-less condition of coexistence between individuals.”<sup>6</sup> Quite the opposite, in fact.

Zerilli’s picture of two people diverging on the nature of some particular is full of political significance that Panagia ought to appreciate. First of all, that a person so much as *takes* another *to be* an “interlocutor” is a political gesture—it provisionally asserts mutual belonging in a group that, by implication, *ought* to see this “particular” in the same certain way. And it further evinces an *investment* in this belonging-together: one does not bother trying to bring another into agreement unless that agreement (a) is possible and (b) matters. The giving or requesting of criteria is tantamount to wagering a kind of belonging-together that politics, at bottom, is. Far from any possibility of criteria-less co-belonging, criteria are recounted as a *means* of testing the possibility of belonging together.

There is also something to say against Panagia’s association of Zerilli (or Cavell) with social contractarianism. Zerilli’s criteria are nothing like “already agreed-upon conditions.” Whether or not interlocutors *can* agree is the very issue. In Zeril-

---

5. *Ibid.*, xi.

6. I’m indebted to Ingeborg Löfgren for making the impossibility of a “criteria-less condition of co-existence” clear to me.

li's picture, the fact that the interlocutors do not see the "particular at hand" in the same way is confounding to them. Criteria are elicited as a response to *this* confounding state—that another, with whom one would *expect* to agree, subsumes it in a different way, takes it to be something else. In that respect, eliciting criteria rather aim at what Richard Eldridge describes in terms of achieving a "reorientation"<sup>7</sup> toward this "particular at hand." In thinking of the criterial conversation in terms of Eldridge's reorientation or Cavell's "showing that the world is otherwise than you see," it becomes clear that elicited criteria do not appeal to any "common set of conditions" to which the participants have previously agreed. Rather, agreement is being *sought* where it had been heretofore *assumed*; the criterial conversation itself is an act of using one's own stance on the world as the (groundless, aspirational) appeal to another.

Panagia affirms the link between Rancière's politico-aesthetic thought and Wittgenstein's discussions of aspect-dawning;<sup>8</sup> (Panagia 2018, 15); I suggest that the eliciting of criteria amounts to *showing* rather than *saying*, and that its political operation is the facilitation of aspect-dawning in another. Eliciting criteria, therefore, is the very *making count* that Panagia's Rancière seeks.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cavell's Acknowledgment and Making Criteria Count**

As I said above, I think that Panagia misinterprets the relation of criteria and its eliciting to the activity of judgment as Zerilli and Cavell understand it. On Panagia's view, judgment necessarily presupposes the (Kantian) subject or (Aristotelian) *hypokeime-non*, which always stands before or beneath any given action, and over against the

7. Richard Eldridge, ed., *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

8. Panagia, *Rancière's Sentiments*, x.

9. If Panagia criticizes Cavell and Zerilli for their reliance on (a certain picture of) judgment in politics, he also approvingly cites Aletta Norval, despite the fact that, so far as I can see, she accurately frames Cavell as helping to dissolve a dilemma that Panagia's Rancière seems to tackle head-on (Norvall 2012). Cavellian judgment occupies the space between those horns, rather than choosing sides, as I think Panagia reads Zerilli and Cavell. Zerilli seems to see judgment exactly as Norval does, as occupying an "In-between space (neither *objective* nor *subjective* as philosophy has traditionally defined them)" (Linda Zerilli, *Toward a Democratic Theory of Judgment* [University of Chicago Press, 2016], xvii). In Panagia's reading, though, Rancière picks the right side (active intervention) of this dilemma and Cavell picks the wrong one (privileging inward judgment). I'm arguing, with Norval and Zerilli, that the opposition of Cavell to Rancière is based on missing the active and public nature of Cavellian judgment.

objective world. Judgment itself is therefore something like an internal or private operation, which uses criteria as a means of determining what kind of thing or situation anything is. This view depicts the subject as (1) fundamentally isolated from others in (2) attempting to make sense of the world prior to acting in it. Panagia's Rancière objects on precisely these grounds: that politics must be *participatory*, and also, and therefore, primarily *active* in the world. Panagia is arguing against an actually-existing view of judgment and politics, to be sure, but it is not Cavell's or Zerilli's.

Instead, Cavell is one of a group of Wittgenstein readers that understands Wittgenstein as militating *against* the use or sort of criteria that require what Owen and Havercroft call "substantive principle[s] that can be stated independently and in advance of the particular disputes in which [they are] manifest."<sup>10</sup> Panagia cites these authors in support of his own view, so it's worth noting that, in fact, Zerilli herself takes exactly the same position on criteria: "[The standard] view of mutual intelligibility.... separates out criteria from actual judgments, makes them the ground of such judgments, and in this way assumes that we have criteria for all eventualities. It assumes that a person's divergent application of a word can simply and definitively be corrected by reminding the person of its agreed criteria."<sup>11</sup> Eliciting criteria is not an act of citation to originary contracts or agreements because, on the Cavellian reading of Wittgenstein, "we cannot have agreed beforehand to all that would be necessary."<sup>12</sup> The version of "judgment" against which Panagia argues makes the interpretation of some founding principle or rule central to political discussions. Cavell, Zerilli, and similar readers of Wittgenstein aver, however, that this view mischaracterizes the way agreement works in our lives.

Robert Fogelin, for instance, sees the affinity among rule-following, ostensive definition, and so on in terms of a "paradox of interpretation," and Fogelin's reading of Wittgenstein emphasizes the *Investigations* §201b: "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation." Fogelin reads Wittgenstein as repeatedly raising, to show the unworkability of, explanations grounded in the mental judgment Panagia

---

10. Panagia, *Rancière's Sentiments*, 15.

11. Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, 22.

12. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 31.

disparages. Instead, Fogelin sees Wittgenstein gesturing toward a way of “grasping” the world that is *not* mentally or interpretively centered:

Wittgenstein is not saying that an individual's interpretation of a rule is correct to the extent that it squares with the community's interpretation of it. In rule-following, we join a consensus in *action*—a consensus grounded in the kind of training that we, as humans, *can* successfully undergo and the kind of training that we actually *do* undergo in the community in which we are reared.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note—because Panagia decries “consensus theories of democratic representation”—that Fogelin’s “consensus in action” is distinguished from a consensus in opinion or interpretation. It emphasizes the *joining* with others via activity in the world, rather than agreement in opinion. The way in which the eliciting of criteria amounts to a call to action, an invitation to *join* a particular community of action, is something that Panagia misses. Cavellian criteria, therefore, are nothing like Owen and Havercroft’s “universals.” Criteria serve a different purpose, and this fact is the key to understanding Cavell’s politics.

I find myself wanting to say that Cavellian criteria are not *fully themselves* except in their application, in their embodiment in various judgments, here understood as attitudinal comportments, or ontological stances, on the world. While it is possible to understand criteria as transcendent principles, criteria pictured thusly are inert and powerless for Cavell—“dead,” he calls them. Thinking of criteria as fundamentally external features is precisely what leads to scenes of reprehensible obtuseness in Cavell’s work, such as the specter of a person kneeling over the crumpled victim of an auto accident, saying, “Yes, but on what grounds can I call what you’re experiencing *pain*?” This picture of seeking out criteria because they would constitute the basis on which one could accurately describe the inner states of another, or cause one to react appropriately to another’s inner states, fully demonstrates the limitations of transcendent criteria for Cavell.

---

13. Robert J. Fogelin, *Taking Wittgenstein at His Word: A Textual Study* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 28.

It is with reference to something like the above example that Cavell first draws out his notion of *acknowledgment*. The obtuseness in the scene is precisely related to the inappropriateness of the quest for certainty in the face of emergent need. Cavell describes this in “Knowing and Acknowledging”: “Your suffering makes a *claim* on 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.”<sup>14</sup> Whatever criteria’s role in the determination of whether another is suffering, they are fully embodied in one’s response to, or the stance one adopts toward, that suffering. Importantly, the image of the kneeling philosopher in pursuit of certainty about the accident victim’s suffering is *also* a picture of response, a *failure* of acknowledgement that Cavell variously calls deflection, avoidance, or refusal. The kneeling philosopher’s avoidance is an example of skeptical withdrawal for Cavell, a decision *not* to allow our ordinary criteria to *count*, or to move us.

Cavell most clearly brings out this structural co-possibility of either acknowledgement or its avoidance in considering cases of another’s pain and in the parable of the craftsman and the doll toward the end of *The Claim of Reason*. Both cases serve to show that “judgment” is unworkable when imagined as this two-part process: the kind of *certainty* required at stage one in order to generate a correct response at stage two is both “impossible and unnecessary,” as David Stern has termed it.<sup>15</sup> No amount of available knowledge is capable of *yielding* the proper response, and yet proper responses to various situations occur at every moment of every day. Cavell’s acknowledgment is an attempt to undo this kind of “phenomenon-splitting,” as Glendinning calls it, and knit the two parts together again, reconstituting judgment as a single-stage process of responsive aspect-seeing.

Cavell thus joins with a host of others, again including Panagia, who emphasize that the “intellectualist” or “disengaged” view of judgment leads us astray. If we make skillful responsiveness to the world or to others dependent upon the possession of correct knowledge, then the possibility of this responsiveness seems to vanish, and, just as Panagia fears, the possibility of political intervention vanishes along with it.

---

14. Stephen Mulhall. *The Cavell Reader* (London: Wiley, 1996), 98.

15. David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115.

Acknowledgment is Cavell's way of reorienting us from the (impossible) quest for certainty about facts to the moral demand of responding correctly to, and thus seeing correctly, the relevant facts of the matter. This reorientation of the issue might be taken as an elaboration of Wittgenstein's distinction between attitude and opinion: "My attitude towards him is an attitude toward a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul."<sup>16</sup> But if this is so, what then of criteria's import?

### Conversation, Criteria, and Politics

Cavellian criteria, as I have sketched the story so far, simply do play the *grounding* role that Panagia imagines them playing in judgment and political action; as Cavell's kneeling philosopher serves to illustrate, skeptical withdrawal remains a standing possibility upon which criteria's mere existence cannot foreclose. Instead, as Zerilli has it, criteria constitute something like the means with—and by—which interlocutors assert and invite one another into the world as they find it. Criteria's relevance, here, has nothing to do with the private encounter with an object, but with making public, and therefore political, sense of things.

Where Panagia imagines disagreements in terms of the moment of ungroundedness and its consequent freedom, the kinds of divergences figured in Cavell tend to take the form of *disorientation* with respect to the world or to others. "Counting" our criteria—or recounting, etc.—is an attempt at re-locating ourselves in worlds both public and private, of re-finding ourselves among others. Invoking our criteria may seem in every case to be metaphysical speculation, but for Wittgenstein and for Cavell, it is a practical exercise. Because our criteria ordinarily operate in the background, enmeshing us in a public world, we might draw upon them in order to recall ourselves to ourselves or our community when we experience this uncanny moment of discord. Counting and recounting our criteria is precisely an attempt at resolving this discord by bringing another to acknowledge a situation as we do, or else to learn to acknowledge it as they do.

---

16. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §22

Cavell himself dramatizes this sort of interaction in the *Claim of Reason*, where he explicitly couches the voicing of criteria in terms of expressing “what points are at issue in various judgments.” To recount criteria to another or to oneself is to name the relevant aspects of a given thing or situation; to recount criteria in this way is to test the extent of a shared sense of relevance. The affordances and stakes of conversations about judgments depicted here presents a stark contrast with Panagia’s understanding of a judgment-based politics.

Arriving at agreement successfully, for Cavell, is figured in two broadly-defined kinds of situations: (1) scenes of what he will call “initiation,” in which a child or a stranger is entering into or acquiring the sorts of agreements that undergird the possibility of politics, and (2) encounters between full-fledged members of a given group in which interlocutors find that they are out of alignment with one another. In the former case, it will turn out that this agreement is not, and cannot be, founded upon *reasons*. In the latter case, and following directly from the above, if disagreements are to be resolved, citations to founding reasons cannot and do not effect such a resolution, as the notion of “founding” reasons is misguided from the start.

How does one come to agree with others in *judgments* about, say, how to use words, over and above agreement in *definitions*, as Wittgenstein frames the issue? In response to this, Wittgenstein answers, in §208 of the *Investigations*, that “I’ll teach him to use the words by means of *examples* and *exercises* – And when I do this, I do not communicate less to him than I know myself.” Robert Fogelin underscores the latter portion, especially: “She [the teacher] is not holding anything back. She is not in possession of a secret key that she is trying to pass on to her student that, when successfully transmitting, will complete the training.”<sup>17</sup> This is a further indication that universals, here figured as definitions, are neither necessary nor sufficient to projecting a skillful behavior into the future, and so, just as Panagia sees it, a version of politics that seeks to found itself on some sort of axiomatic set of propositions will always come up short.

This passage of Wittgenstein’s is often invoked in the way that Fogelin employs it—as a model of how children or neophytes in fact learn how things are done, in fact come into agreement with others in the absence of definitional sufficiency. Ca-

---

17. Fogelin, *Taking Wittgenstein at His Word*, 38.

vell is instructively unique in drawing out the implications of *lacking* that definitional security, which is to say, the possibility of failures of initiation:

Our ability to communicate with him... depends upon our mutual attunement in judgments. It is astonishing how far this takes us in understanding one another, but it has its limits, and these are not merely, one might say, the limits of knowledge but the limits of experience. And when these limits are reached, when our attunements are dissonant, I cannot get below them to firmer ground. The power I felt in my breath as my words flew to their effect now vanishes into thin air. For not only does he not receive me, because his natural reactions are not mine, but my own understanding is found to go no farther than my own natural reactions bear it. I am thrown back upon myself; I as it were turn my palms outward, as if to exhibit the kind of creature I am, and declare my ground occupied, only mine, ceding yours.<sup>18</sup>

I read Cavell's inclination to turn his palms outward as a reference to the same portion of the *Investigations* that Fogelin draws upon, in which Wittgenstein dramatizes the end of reasons: "Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."<sup>19</sup>

This impasse is not an abyss. Remaining, in each version of this scene, are the protagonists, facing one another. One has his palms turned out; one says, perhaps with a shrug, this is simply what I do. This moment retains its political and ethical core. Even in the outward palms and in the shrug, there remains a moral claim: you *ought* to be like me, to see things as I do. In the void of reasons, this is what is shown: the attitudinal comportment of each toward the other as *another self*, as one among whom I belong too, as Heidegger has it.

This scene, as recounted in Cavell and Fogelin and innumerable others—and even in the subtitle of this article—is always pictured as the *end* of a story, as the *final* gesture in an interpersonal encounter, as what remains when reasons give out. But the gesture itself, that is, confronting another with what you say and do as the asser-

---

18. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 115.

19. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §217.

tion of a claim upon them that they should say and do the same, is really also the *initial* move in this encounter, as well. Reaching bedrock is merely the uncovering of this existing condition. This stance, this posture, is the very gesture of politics. Even in their failure or frustration, these are attempts at *making criteria count*.

This stance itself—a particular attitude toward another, as toward a soul—is centrally at stake in the second category of Cavell’s depictions of confrontation or discord: scenes of consent, we might call them. These are omnipresent in the Cavellian corpus, ranging from his reading of *Othello* in the *Claim of Reason* to his considerations of “screwball comedies” in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Cities of Words*. This sort of confrontation—taking place between a pair of people who in some sense belong together—is always, Cavell notes, “the means of determining whether we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives.”<sup>20</sup> These conversations turn on precisely what kind of stance one finds oneself capable of adopting with respect to a certain other. Another’s way of holding the world asks for ratification; can this other change one’s way of looking at things, as Wittgenstein asks? Can we come to see the world in the way the other’s criteria suggests that it is?

Cavellian judgment, embodied in the ontological stances one finds oneself taking toward the objects and people of one’s world, is therefore more of a discovery about oneself in relation to others than a decision in that regard. For that reason, our ability to agree with one another in judgments is perpetually at issue, perpetually subject to success or failure. This is starkly different from the social contractarians’ view. Where Panagia criticizes a judgment-centered view of democracy, he singles out the necessity of our “already-agreed upon commitments” to certain form of political interaction. Cavell’s point, in this vein, is precisely that our agreements, even if we *had* actually made all the necessary ones, could not secure our *continuing* agreement, or show us the way forward. Indeed, our continued agreement in judgments are what we show or fail to show in these conversational or confrontational encounters.

When Cavell turns explicitly to considerations of democracy in his work on Emerson, he refigures his movement of acknowledgment in terms of political consent. In “Being Odd, Getting Even,” Cavell says, briefly considering the case of *Ham-*

---

20. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2005), 25.

let, “The emphasis in the question ‘To be or not to be’ seems not on whether to die, but on whether to be born, on whether to affirm or deny the fact of natality, as a way of enacting, or not, one’s existence.” Importantly, a few lines later, he characterizes the decision in terms of assuming a “posture” toward the aforementioned fact of natality. And he goes on to say explicitly that “these matters are represented in political thought under the heading of consent.”<sup>21</sup> The comportment *toward* a set of facts, after the facts alone have exhausted their ability to move us, is also what he means by acknowledgment.

Consent further echoes acknowledgment to the extent that its movement is “simultaneously turned toward oneself and toward one’s contribution to the communal,” as Cavell remarks elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> As Cavell notes in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, “the issue of consent becomes the issue of whether the voice I lend in recognizing a society as mine, as speaking for me, as my voice, my own.” Consent therefore also involves assuming a posture in which one’s voice speaks for one’s community, while also reciprocally acknowledging that the community’s voice voices one’s own self.<sup>23</sup> And like acknowledgment, this consent can be withheld or avoided, and by the same skeptical means, say with the image of “already agreed-upon commitments” as securing or exhausting this consent.

Cavell’s scene of conversation is therefore dramatically dissimilar from Panagia’s vision of exchanging reasons with an aim of persuasion. In the first place, because *consent* is perpetually at issue, the requested alteration occurs at the deeper level of agreeing in judgments. Wittgenstein’s scene of consent, one might say, occurs in the *Investigations* §144: “I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* sequence of pictures,” in action, that is, rather than opinion. In the second place, the issue of consent is not restricted to considerations of outcomes, but is tested throughout, in the fact of conversation itself, the fact that it is continuing or ceasing at every moment. Conversation, as a confrontation between

---

21. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 128.

22. Cavell, “Philosophy as Education,” in *Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups*, ed. Paul Standish and Naoko Saito (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 213.

23. There is something complementary to be said here about Agamben’s reading of the Aristotelian distinction between *zoē* and *bios*. Mathew Abbott has done this already, and extremely well.

interlocutors over a matter of common concern, bodies forth and enacts a certain polity via, necessarily, the eliciting of criteria.

### **Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, All Lives Matter**

The Movement for Black Lives emerged in the wake of several killings of African Americans, largely at the hands of state agents. Darren Wilson's killing of Michael Brown in 2014 and George Zimmerman's slaying of Trayvon Martin in 2012 elevated the Movement to its current prominence, even as further incidents continue to occur. In the shape of its specific claims about the world we inhabit, and in the responses the Movement garners, I propose that the Movement for Black Lives offers a contemporary example of engaging in Cavellian conversation and politics writ large: the eliciting and recounting of criteria such that "the way we now hold the world is contrasted with, reformed into, a future way we could help it become."<sup>24</sup>

In a recent article, Russell Rickford outlines both the substantive demands and political practices of the Movement:

Demanding accountability for racist violence and an immediate end to the murder of black people at the hands of the state, Black Lives Matter activists have used a host of disruptive techniques to advance their cause. Their mainstay has been occupation—of highways, intersections, sporting events, retail stores, malls, campaign events, police stations, and municipal buildings.... What is evident is that most Black Lives Matter adherents recognize the inherent shortcomings of appeals to politicians, the courts, and other "acceptable" channels of redress, and have wholeheartedly embraced the arena of the street.<sup>25</sup>

The political methods described above comport with Panagia's distaste for exchange-of-reasons politics, and so the way in which these methods figure Cavell's notion of a

---

24. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 1.

25. Russell Rickford, "Black Lives Matter: Toward a Modern Practice of Mass Struggle," *New Labor Forum* 25.1 (2016): 36.

conversation that *shows* will elucidate the continuity between Cavell and Panagia's Rancière that Panagia overlooks.

At explicit issue in the demands and practices of the Movement are the criteria for the mattering of a given life. The call for protest actions in defense of black life emerges from a view that, manifestly, black lives do not matter. The criteria elicited here, the criteria of injustice, often focus on the dual facts that in initial encounters, police err on the side of lethal violence in the face of perceived threats to their own lives, and that in the legal proceedings that follow, indictments and convictions for these officers have not much followed. Blackness is disposable. This is the picture of things that the Movement places before the public, the acceptance of which, in Wittgensteinian parlance, would consist in our now being inclined to regard such cases differently.

But large segments of the political right not only reject this picture of things, but also take these claims, and these criteria, as specific attacks on their own version of the world. The mantras "Blue Lives Matter," referring to police lives, and "All Lives Matter" serve to typify these responses. The criteria for the notion that the Movement for Black Lives actively denigrates and endangers police officers comes not only from the high-profile revenge murder of two NYPD officers, but also the exonerations of officers involved in deadly encounters with African Americans. These legal results publicly support the notion that officers were justified in fearing for their lives and discharging their weapons in self-defense. The "All Lives Matter" motto, meanwhile, takes the Movement to be singling out Black Lives for "special rights" or special treatment, which would fly in the face of American equality-for-all ideals.

Both of these responses to the Movement amount to confronting activists – and the third-party public—with contrasting pictures of the situation, pictures that similarly lodge a demand for acceptance. Emphasizing officers' roles in black death encourages violence against officers, and to that extent endangers their lives; and demanding "special" care by officers is tantamount to asking for "free stuff" based on racial identity, and to that extent is racist itself. I wish to highlight the ways in which the Blue Lives and All Lives arguments engage in Cavellian avoidance or refusal in the face of the Movement's claims.

Most prominently, these modes of argumentation refuse to respond to the central element of the Movement's picture: the racial disparity in lethal state violence, which would phenomenologically attest to the null value of black lives. The accusation does not rest on whether individual officers hold prejudicial opinions, but on the simple fact of disproportionate black death. But this central fact is persistently avoided. Blue Lives Matter argues that criticizing officers can lead to prejudicial views of the police, which can itself lead to violence. All Lives Matter simply argues that the Movement's motto itself is a call for inequality that we ought to reject.

These responses to Black Lives Matter are in this way refusals of the first demand—to consider black lives. Both responses look away from the particular cases that the Movement cites and instead look either to cases that support their view or to transcendent principles. When activists adopt the Occupy protest tactics that Rickford cites, some states reacted by considering legislation to decriminalize drivers who hit protesters. All of these responses make the Movement's point for them: your lives are not as important as police lives, as our principles, as our commute time.

The example of the Movement for Black Lives only serves to show that our (American) democratic practices are not well-described by the kind of reason-centered social-contractarianism that Panagia rejects. Cavellian conversation, though, does account for this kind of political divergence. As Rickford notes, the disruptive protest practices “serve as a means of dramatizing routine attacks on black life,” that is, serve to make the relevant criteria evident through action; serve to *show* it, alongside and beyond any saying. Nor is this a new feature. Shana Redmond, for instance, details the long history of musical practices in public spaces as central to African American (and labor) organizing, another method of intervening in public space and inviting others to share in one's picture of things, in one's judgments.

Cavell's work on agreement, consent, and acknowledgment in the realm of the political not only goes beyond the limits of contractarian political thought that Panagia identifies, but also participates in Panagia's own project of making criteria count. Rickford notes that it remains “unclear” whether the Movement for Black Lives either “rejects” or “simply mistrusts” electoral politics. But from a Cavellian perspective, we can see the Movement is involved in a deeper politics—not attempting to garner votes for this or that candidate, but trying to assert and to test whether the relative value of

black lives will be a public issue at all. In the course of the confrontational conversation with Blue Lives and All Lives supporters, the criteria of what counts as demonstrating a life's value, and what counts as standing with and standing against a certain picture of the world, emerge. The stakes are not restricted to the next election cycle. As in every confrontation, and with every issue, the conversation reveals the extent to which we do or do not in fact live together, and elucidates the conditions under which we may continue—or begin—to do so.

# Seeing Selves and Imagining Others: Aesthetic Interpretation and the Claim to Community in Cavell

JON NAJARIAN

Politics is aesthetic in principle.

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

From his early childhood, Stanley Cavell learned to tread carefully the intervening space between twin pillars: of aesthetic sensibility on the one hand, and political belonging on the other. Early in his memoir *Little Did I Know*, Cavell establishes a set of differences between his mother and father that far exceed both gender and age (his father was ten years older than his mother), as he notes the starkly contrasting dispensations of their respective families:

The artistic temperament of my mother's family, the Segals, left them on the whole, with the exception of my mother and her baby brother, Mendel, doubtfully suited to an orderly, successful existence in the new world; the orthodox, religious sensibility of my father's family, the Goldsteins, produced a second generation—some twenty-two first cousins of mine—whose solidarity and severity of expectation produced successful dentists, lawyers, and doctors, pillars of the Jewish community, and almost without exception attaining local, some of them national, some even a certain international, prominence.<sup>1</sup>

From his mother's family, Cavell would inherit the musical sensibility that, had he not ventured into the world of academic philosophy, might have led him towards a career as a musician or in music. In his father's family Cavell observes a religious belonging that, in the decades in which Cavell is raised, becomes morally inseparable from politi-

---

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

cal belonging, as the rise of European anti-Semitism and the threat of Hitler's ascent to power would drastically alter the political significance of Jewish religious identification.

Indeed, at the end of his first entry in the memoir (which is written as a series of diary entries), Cavell recognizes that he had previously cited the work Vladimir Jankelevitch not because of Jankelevitch's interest in music, but because with Hitler's rise "Jankelevitch forswore forever reading and mentioning German philosophy and listening to German music."<sup>2</sup> Jankelevitch's "practice of ... renunciation," which for Cavell is common practice in the teaching of philosophy, becomes a productive philosophical counterpoint: the aim of the philosopher, as Cavell articulates it in the next entry, is "to write, however limitedly, the autobiography of a species; if not of humanity as a whole, then representative of anyone who finds himself or herself in it."<sup>3</sup> The claim to community is a dominant trend in Cavell's philosophy from *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Claim of Reason to Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* and is perhaps his most important inheritance from the work of Wittgenstein and Austin, which Cavell summarizes succinctly in the memoir: "this is how I have understood Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and J. L. Austin's procedures, in their appeals to the language of everyday, or ordinary language, namely, that I speak philosophically for others when they recognize what I say as what they would say, recognize that their language is mine, or put otherwise, that language is ours, that we are speakers" (6). If, as Cavell posits, the project of the philosopher—or at least the philosopher of ordinary language—is to "speak philosophically for others," then Jankelevitch's renunciation of German philosophy and German music becomes inherently inimical to the practice of philosophy. The renunciation would put Cavell at odds with both the philosopher he loved most, the Austrian Wittgenstein, who fought for the Central Powers in WWI and who, in struggling with own Jewishness, made anti-Semitic remarks that were uncomfortably similar to the rhetoric of the Nazi party (comments he abandoned, thankfully, as the Nazi party rose to power)<sup>4</sup>; and also at

---

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.

4. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Penguin, 1990), 313-17. Monk situates Wittgenstein's anti-Semitism within a broad context of European anti-Semitic sentiment, and notes that Wittgenstein never fully believed his own anti-Semitism. Indeed, Wittgenstein was horrified by the developments leading up the WWII, and his family faced grave dangers because of their Jewish background. See also Marjorie Perloff, "To Become a Different Person': Wittgenstein, Christianity, and the Modernist Ethos," in *Wittgenstein and Modernism*, ed. Michael Lemahieu and Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 41-56.

odds with the German musical tradition of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven (all of whom are referenced throughout *Little Did I Know*) that was so important to his early musical education.<sup>5</sup>

If I'm overstating the contrast between the aesthetic and the political in the early years of Cavell's personal life, it's to try to understand how these contrasting dispensations shaped his philosophical work. As I'll demonstrate in the rest of the essay, there is a strong impetus in Cavell towards bridging the aesthetic and the political, though in a vastly different vein than Benjamin's aestheticization of politics. I argue, contra Benjamin, that Cavell is interested in the politicization of aesthetics, in understanding how the modes of thought that characterize aesthetic judgment are fundamental to our participation in civic life. For Cavell, to engage aesthetic objects is, as Kant suggested, to make yourself known to others, to unveil something about yourself and your world-view, and (as Cavell says elsewhere about "passionate utterances")<sup>6</sup> to invite others to share in your sense of how the world strikes you. In his writings on both aesthetic experience and political engagement, Cavell relies on a notion of subjective expression that is subtly but seriously committed to interpersonal and communal interaction.

This is to say neither that art underpins our political institutions nor that it provides definitions and arguments for individual rights. Nor is it to suggest that art and political life are merely analogous; it is not that some aspect of our aesthetic experience have surprising but inconsequential overlap with our understanding of the lives of others. Rather, this essay draws on recent work on the relationship between politics and aesthetics and traces the considerable extent to which making aesthetic judgments entails the sorts of activities—imagining and interpreting another's subjectivity, understanding your own relation to another, giving voice to an argument that you want others to accept even as you recognize that they may not—that are essential

---

5. Cavell recognizes the potential political danger of claiming to speak for others, especially when you claim to speak for a disadvantaged or politically oppressed group. He recognizes, moreover, that those speaking from positions of oppression might balk at the suggestion that their words be seemingly stripped of the historically specific conditions that prompted them and accepted instead as a universalist creed of common human belonging—Cavell confesses "that certain women I know who write philosophically would not at all be glad to adopt this posture," (*Little Did I Know*, 6) and the same may be true for other historically disenfranchised groups who feel the power of oppression and the weight of history bearing down on their shoulders.

6. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2005).

to the formation of political communities. Moreover, I argue that for Cavell (and by extension for Wittgenstein) our experience of others is itself an aesthetic one, most evident in Cavell's explication of Wittgenstein's famously cryptic remarks about seeing something as something.<sup>7</sup> The world of appearances, whether the face in a painting or the face of an other, motivates our understanding of our place in relation to the world around us. Coming to speak philosophically for others—and being able to recognize when they speak for us—relies on practices of visual perception, interpretation, and aesthetic judgement, all of which inform our ability to see others and their words as criteria for community.

Critical thought on the relationship between aesthetics and politics has long been haunted by Benjamin's warnings about the Fascist threat inherent to the aestheticization of politics. In recent years, however, philosophers and theorists have begun to rethink the role aesthetics can play in the development of political thought. Most prominently, Jacques Rancière has suggested "There is thus an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the 'aestheticization of politics' specific to the 'age of the masses'. This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art."<sup>8</sup> Rather, Rancière continues, aesthetics is "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Cavell's work often bears directly on questions of how aesthetic attunement can inform our political sensibility. As Nikolas Kompridis points out in the introduction to his edited collection *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (2014),

---

7. Cf. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 354-90.

8. Jacques Rancière, *The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 13.

9. Rancière, *Distribution of the Sensible*, 13. Building on the work of Rancière, David Panagia seeks to explore the ways in which our everyday interactions with the world of appearances are at once aesthetic and political. See his *Ten Theses for an Aesthetics of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Panagia pushes back against the idea that aesthetic judgment is purely sensory, and therefore shouldn't have a place in political discourse that should strive (on certain accounts) to be purely rational. Characterizing the view he works against, Panagia writes, "if it is true that instances of aesthetic appreciation are akin to intellectual stultification, and if spectatorship is characterized as a space of distraction from what is properly political, then the everyday moments we all have of looking, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling, and those minute instances whereby we derive an unverifiable sense of pleasure or disturbance from such moments of aesthetic appreciation, are simply bad" (xii).

there are problems of politics that can appear as political problems only in an aesthetic dimension. Adapting a thought of Stanley Cavell's for our own purposes, we might say that the aesthetic turn consists in political thought's recognition of and response to the *aesthetic problems of modern politics*. We can give them the following names: the problem of voice and voicelessness, the problem of the new, the problem of integrating (rather than dichotomizing) the ordinary and the extraordinary, the problem of judgment, the problem of responsiveness and receptivity, the problem of appearance, and of what is given to sense to make sense of, and, more generally, the problem of the meaning and scope of the aesthetic dimension of politics.<sup>10</sup>

For Kompridis, attention to these questions (of voice and voicelessness, ordinary and extraordinary, judgments and appearances) in political thought might come to supplement questions about justice, liberty, and constitution, staking out a political terrain that is implicitly aesthetic. As Andrew Norris has argued, the emphasis in political philosophy on questions of justice and liberty over judgment and appearance probably explains the relative dearth of attention Cavell has received as a political thinker. Noting that Cavell has received far more attention as someone interested in skepticism, Norris suggests that it is nonetheless surprising that the political implications of his thought have been undervalued; Cavell is interested, after all, in understanding how "Who *we* are and what beliefs and actions *we* are committed to is something only you and I and others joining us can say. Our common identity is articulated in conversations in which we as individuals give and weigh our reasons, our sense of what should count for us, and why."<sup>11</sup>

This work provides a foundation from which we can begin to understand the extent of Cavell's interest in the political dimension of aesthetic judgment. I'm particularly interested in the expanded notions of the aesthetic that many of these thinkers employ. Kompridis casts the aesthetic in contexts beyond the mere appreciation of art and writes, "By 'aesthetic' or 'aesthetics' we mean much more than a specialized inquiry into the nature of art, artworks, or beauty, grounded in a sensuous, usually

10. Nikolas Kompridis, ed., *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), xix-xx.

11. Andrew Norris, "Stanley Cavell and the Claim to Community," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 2.

non-cognitive, mode of perception. What is meant is something much wider in scope, something that is still being explored and mapped, something directly implicated in what counts as cognition, reason, experience, meaning and agency.”<sup>12</sup> “The aesthetic” complicates modes of engagement, especially epistemologically oriented ones, that structure our experience of the world. That is, for Kompridis, aesthetics is not simply a sensuous contrast to the cognitive, it also asks us to reconsider what cognition looks like. Specifically, and as I elaborate later in the essay, aesthetic judgment is for Cavell a moment of revelatory expression, an effort to make yourself known and to invite others to see the world how you see the world.

Making yourself known or revealing yourself in the face of the other is inherently a political act, though political, it should be clear, only in a specialized and broad sense. That is, like many of the thinkers I’ve cited above, I don’t claim here to demonstrate the ways in which aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment modify or inform political institutions, nor do I hope to suggest that aesthetic judgements disguise (or betray) political ideologies. Rather, I’m interested in how the process of articulating one’s sensibility is fundamental both to making aesthetic judgments and the formation of political life. For Cavell, community is that which fosters intersubjective expression: “To speak for oneself politically is to speak for the other with whom you consent to association, and it is to consent to be spoken for by them.”<sup>13</sup> Recognizing the other as an agent that might speak for me, and understanding my own relation to her and her words, is the foundation of both aesthetic and political life. Just as crucial, however, is the possibility of disagreement, since, as Cavell puts it, “To speak for yourself means the rebuff [...] of those for whom you claimed to be speaking; and it means risking having to rebuff [...] those who claimed to be speaking for you.”<sup>14</sup> The definition of community and political life that Cavell provides is not homogenous, and not one that seeks to erase or overlook the differences between us. On the contrary, Cavell defines political life by beginning from the premise that we are different, that we occupy distinct subjectivities, and that my words won’t necessarily be yours; and yet sometimes we find ourselves in the words of others. Consider, for example, Stephen Mulhall’s suggestion that “aesthetic debate is thus a way of cons-

---

12. Kompridis, ed., *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, xvi.

13. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 27.

14. *Ibid.*, 27.

tructing or discovering community through the articulation and development of individuality; it shows a way in which community can be founded upon the fuller expression, rather than the complete repression, of individuality.”<sup>15</sup> Political community, like aesthetic experience, depends upon the ability to articulate a subjectivity even while we embrace the subjectivity and the individuality of others.

As is clear from much of Cavell’s work, to belong to a community depends on the ability to communicate and to be understood, and Cavell’s early essay “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” is first and foremost an essay about communicating an understanding, and about understanding the act of communication. While he spends the first half of the essay discussing the paraphrasability of metaphor, poetry as a “formulable” art, and the atonality of modern music, Cavell characteristically refuses to come down on one side of the issues he raises. His point, of course, is not that the issue is too complex to decide one way or another, but rather to demonstrate how we might think about difficult poetry, or difficult music. “Brooks is wrong to say that poems cannot in principle be fully paraphrased,” Cavell writes, “but right to be worried about the relation between paraphrase and poem.”<sup>16</sup> To be worried about the relation between paraphrase and poem is not, for Cavell, justification for the belief that poems cannot be paraphrased. As Cavell suggests, this “has the gait of a false issue”<sup>17</sup> because Brooks has misunderstood the role of the critic, whose job is not (or shouldn’t be) to denounce paraphrase as a poetic impossibility but rather to model the sorts of problems that paraphrase poses.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes when dealing with difficult poetry, such as Hart Crane or Wallace Stevens, we may realize that we are “able to say nothing [about what the lines mean] except that a feeling has been voiced by a kindred spirit and that if someone does not get it he is not in one’s world, or not of one’s flesh.”<sup>19</sup> Art, then, allows us to recognize the standards by which we judge not just art, but also our connection to those

---

15. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1994), 29. Mulhall continues, acknowledging that “If this sort of community can result only from abandoning the guarantee of agreement, then it is hardly surprising that we sometimes choose abandonment” (29).

16. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82.

17. *Ibid.*, 75.

18. As Anthony Cascardi has written, criticism for Cavell “is a way of engaging those things that philosophy—whether as epistemology or as metaphysics—had learned to avoid.” Cascardi, “Cavell and Kant: The Work of Criticism and the Work of Art,” in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2011), 48.

19. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 81.

around us, while criticism is the route that bridges us. The successful critic is able to communicate what she sees in the work of art, and to get others to see it there too.<sup>20</sup>

“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” demonstrates Cavell’s commitment to approaching aesthetic judgment as an act of communal understanding and expression. The essay is devoted not to understanding whether modern music is or might be atonal, and not to arguing straightforwardly that it is tonal; rather, Cavell is interested in interrogating the habits of mind and speech that allow us to voice arguments intelligibly, in understanding how we communicate our aesthetic commitments and, moreover, how expressions of aesthetic understanding either contribute to or undermine our appeals to community. Cavell writes about how “we may find ourselves *within* the experience of such compositions, following them” and suggests that “then the question whether this is music and the problem its tonal sense, will be—not answered or solved, but rather they will disappear, seem irrelevant.”<sup>21</sup> If we find ourselves within and following a composition, we might be tempted to say that the composition—like the work of good philosophy, in Cavell’s sense—speaks for us, that we can identify with it, that we can see ourselves in the composition. This sense of identification, of finding ourselves in a work, justifies our aesthetic engagement and, moreover, the Kantian sense that others can, or should, or must, see what we see in a work of art. “It is essential,” Cavell writes “to making an aesthetic judgment that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don’t you see, don’t you hear, don’t you dig?”<sup>22</sup> Two things are striking about the passage: the first, that it is *essential* in

---

20. Cf. Cavell’s discussion of a passage in Hume, who cites a story from *Don Quixote* wherein two men taste supposedly excellent wine. One man proclaims the wine very good, but notes a hint of leather, while the other, agreeing that it is good, suggests a taste of iron; they find, in the bottom of the cask, a key with a leather thong attached to it. “All that makes the critic’s expression of taste worth more than another man’s” Cavell writes, here of the wine critic, “is his ability to produce for himself the thong and key of his response; and his vindication comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there.” *Ibid.*, 87.

21. *Ibid.*, 84. Cavell is following the early and late Wittgenstein, whom he cites on the subsequent page. Cavell summarizes, “the problems of life and the problems of philosophy have related grammars, because solutions to them both have the same form: their problems are solved only when they disappear, and answers arrived at only when there are no longer questions—when, as it were, our accounts have cancelled them” (85).

22. *Ibid.*, 93. Recently, Rita Felski has argued for the value of what she calls “attachment theory,” a notion with links to Cavell’s ideas about attunement, in making aesthetic judgments. She thinks, rightly in my view, that we’ve deeply misunderstood the value of our emotional connection to art objects, and that approaching questions of aesthetic engagement vis-à-vis the attachments we form might shed some light on what we do as critics and, perhaps more importantly, why. Her book on these topics has yet to be published; she’s offered talks at the 2017 MLA Convention in Philadelphia and other venues on the subject.

Cavell's view that to make an aesthetic judgment is to be impelled to communicate, to have the desire to be understood, and to make a claim to community; the second, that in making aesthetic judgments, we become ready to abandon argument. While he admits that "the best critic will know the best points",<sup>23</sup> his suggestion that the claim to community takes the form "don't you see, don't you dig" admits that, somewhere, arguments and reasons come to an end.<sup>24</sup>

Aesthetic judgment is important for Cavell, then, because of the way in which it begets intersubjective expression and prompts us to imagine—or at least to hope to be able to imagine—the world of the other.<sup>25</sup> *Can't you see* isn't just a plea to get someone else to accept my view, but also a recognition that I don't necessarily see theirs; it's an admission of possible difference, and an admission that I may not be able to overcome this difference, and most importantly for Cavell, it's an invitation to *try* to overcome this difference. Aesthetic engagement is an exercise in attempting to understand, as the ordinary language philosopher feels compelled to understand, "what we say," not, as Cavell stresses, in an empirical sense, as if a collection of data could prove definitively that we say or don't say this or that, but in the sense that Cavell summarizes in his memoir, in the sense that productive philosophical discourse must have some bearing on what it means to belong to human community that has a sense of a shared history and culture. This is not, again, to erase the important differences between us, but to prompt introspection, to *look and see*, in Wittgenstein's language,<sup>26</sup> whether we can identify the ways in which someone else's words can speak for me: "the philosopher appealing to everyday language," Cavell writes, "turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself."<sup>27</sup> He continues: "All the philosopher, this kind of philo-

---

23. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 93.

24. Cavell is drawing on Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell), §217; Cavell writes, "At some point, the critic will have to say: This is what I see. Reasons—at definite points, for definite reasons, in different circumstances—come to an end" (MWM 93). This is not to say, however, that aesthetic arguments are therefore shunned to the realm of the irrational, or destined to be forever inconclusive. "The arguments that support them [aesthetic judgments]," Cavell writes, "are not conclusive the way arguments in logic are, nor rational the way arguments in science are. [...] It does not follow, however, that such judgments are not conclusive and rational" (MWM 88).

25. For more on how Cavell's notion of the aesthetic resists or revises a conception of aesthetics that would emphasize social power and class distinction (such as in Bourdieu), see Benjamin Mangrum, "Bourdieu, Cavell, and the Politics of Aesthetic Value," in *Literature & Theology* 29.3 (2015): 260-83.

26. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66.

27. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 95.

sopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own.”<sup>28</sup>

For Cavell, to bridge distinctive subjectivities requires active engagement, the willingness to test out the philosopher’s words against our own experience. It is well known that throughout his “Aesthetic Problems” essay, Cavell is interested in vanquishing the problems that philosophers of (particularly modern) art engage, not by providing answers to the questions they raise but attempting to show how a change in perspective—and, really, a *personal* change, a therapeutic change—can make certain problems seem to disappear. His efforts to dissolve certain of philosophy’s problems is distinctively Wittgensteinian.<sup>29</sup> The problems of both life and philosophy, Cavell writes, “are solved only when they disappear, and answers are arrived at only when there are no longer questions.”<sup>30</sup> This often means, in both Wittgenstein and Cavell, that we undertake to change something about ourselves, something about how we see the world.

Wittgenstein’s frequent appeals to visual perception<sup>31</sup> are a way of encouraging philosophers to approach philosophy therapeutically: we can solve the problems of philosophy, and come to understand something about the world, not if we train our conceptual capabilities to practice theoretical acrobatics but by recognizing the patterns of our perceptions and seeking to change how we view the world. This means not only understanding and changing our perspective, but understanding how our perspective fits in the world, understanding our place in the world around us. “As usual,” Cavell writes in his commentary on Wittgenstein’s invocation of the *Weltanschauung*, “the claim to severe philosophical advance entails a reconception of the subject, a specific sense of revolution.”<sup>32</sup> It’s not, in other words, *solely* about chan-

---

28. Ibid., 96.

29. He cites Wittgenstein and writes: “In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says: ‘The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem’ (6.521); and in the *Investigations* he says: ‘... the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear’ (§133)” (ibid., 85).

30. Ibid., 85.

31. For example, in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66: “look and see whether there is anything common to all [games]”; “don’t think, but look!” And, more importantly for Cavell, §122: “The concept of a surveyable representation [*übersichtlichen Darstellung*] is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is this a ‘Weltanschauung’?). (Before the fourth edition, “surveyable representation” was translated as “perspicuous representation.” Cavell uses “perspicuous,” because it was the translation at the time; today, many commentators still prefer “perspicuous,” despite the difficulties that prompted the change to “surveyable.”)

32. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 86.

ging your perspective, but about understanding your *Weltanschauung* and working, in a therapeutic sense, through the problems that have impeded you.

The term *Weltanschauung* invokes an aesthetically motivated politics, suggesting that our perception informs the beliefs we hold. Cavell links his writing on aesthetic judgment and political belonging most explicitly in his use of the term. Cavell writes, summarizing the segment on embryos, slaves, and humanity in *The Claim of Reason*:

I have wished to say that it is not a fact that human embryos are human beings and that it is nothing more than a fact that certain human beings are slaves. This may be to suggest that someone who expresses himself or herself otherwise inhabits a particular *Weltanschauung*; that the world, and himself in it, has struck him in a particular way.<sup>33</sup>

Cavell has just finished arguing that the slaveowner does indeed see his slaves as people (and not as beasts, for example),<sup>34</sup> and has observed that the slave owner “in the end will appeal to history, to a form, or rather a way, of life: this is what he does. He believes exactly what justice denies, that history and indefinite difference can justify his social difference of position.”<sup>35</sup> Importantly for Cavell, in embracing a perspective that is morally wrong, the slaveowner fails to see the connection between himself and his slaves: “he is rather missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them, so to speak.”<sup>36</sup> It’s not what he does see, that is, but what he *fails* to see that differentiates him from the person who is able to recognize the horrors of slavery; the slaveowner refuses to see his world with nuance, and fails to see the nuance in his world. Part of the problem for Cavell is that the *Weltanschauung* of the slaveowner prohibits him from seeing arguments against slavery. The problem is more aesthetic than it is rational, logical,

---

33. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 378.

34. Cavell writes, “When he [the slaveowner] rapes a slave or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has, by that fact itself, embraced sodomy. [...] He does not go to great lengths either to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. Everything in his relation to his slaves shows that he treats them as more or less human—his humiliations of them, his disappointments, his jealousies, his fears, his punishments, his attachments” (CR 376).

35. *Ibid.*, 376.

36. *Ibid.*

or political: that is, the problem is not that I can't provide an adequate argument against slavery, it's that I can't get my interlocutor to see my argument as adequate. As Cavell puts it in *The Claim of Reason*, "I can *refuse to accept* a 'ground for doubt' without impugning it as false, and without supplying a new basis, and yet not automatically be dismissed as irrational or morally incompetent. What I *cannot* do, and yet maintain my position as morally competent, is to deny the relevance of your doubts."<sup>37</sup>

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that making aesthetic judgments and owning slaves amount, in the end, to the same thing, and I certainly don't mean to imply that holding slaves amounts to little more than engaging with the world aesthetically. Rather, I'm attempting to draw out the parallels between Cavell's claims about aesthetic judgment and his claims about the *Weltanschauung* of the slaveowner, namely that each are motivated by the world of appearances. It's important, I think, to recognize that aesthetic sensibility underwrites Cavell's ideas about political belonging, inclusion, exclusion, and even abuse: not that holding slaves amounts to nothing more than making aesthetic judgments, but that sometimes our experience of the world of appearances, and the act of making aesthetic judgments, can amount to holding slaves, or can provide justification for adopting a worldview that would exclude, objectify, denigrate, and oppress others.

This is not to imply that every political judgment is some sort of coded aesthetic judgment, but rather to suggest that, insofar as the faculties at play in making aesthetic judgments are also responsible for certain political dispositions, the two overlap most explicitly in the act of interpretation. It's worth remembering that Cavell's discussion of seeing people as people (or failing to see the internal connections between people) begins with his suggestion that Wittgenstein's writings on seeing-as are really about interpretation. "Seeing something as something' is what Wittgenstein calls 'interpretation,'" Cavell writes, and adds that "imagination is called for, faced with the other, when I have to take the facts in, realize the significance of what is going on, make the behavior real for myself, make a connection."<sup>38</sup> The emphasis on interpretation becomes the introduction to Cavell's sense, which he inherits from

---

37. *Ibid.*, 267.

38. *Ibid.*, 354.

Wittgenstein, that our responses to and engagements with other people have more to do with aesthetics than they do with claims about knowledge, logic, or reason. “To know another mind,” Cavell writes, “is to interpret a physiognomy, and the message of this region of the *Investigations* is that this is not a matter of ‘mere knowing’.”<sup>39</sup> Cavell then invokes Wittgenstein’s surprising claim that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul.”<sup>40</sup> “Picture” ask us to adopt an aesthetic attitude toward others and underscores the pronounced shift away from the idea that *knowledge* is what mediates people; it’s not that I either know or don’t know another person, but that I respond (or don’t), acknowledge (or refuse to acknowledge), interpret (or fail to interpret) their being, their soul, that which makes them irrefutably human, that which provides us with an internal relation. Throughout pages 355-70 of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell juxtaposes *knowledge* against other, more fitting modes of response to the human other, as he talks about knowledge as a form of experience (357), as expression (358), as attunement and intuition (359), as an attitude (360-61), and as an act of reading and interpretation (369-71). If human bodies are pictures of human souls, then the way to convince someone of the humanity of the other is not through reason and logic, but through aesthetic response: “in knowing others I am generally interpreting them.”<sup>41</sup> In confronting the slaveowner—who, of course, in this example stands in for the *Weltanschauung* that would deny or question that justice supersedes the demands of history and tradition—we are left, in the end, with one argumentative claim: can’t you see?<sup>42</sup>

Seeing something as something, interpreting a physiognomy, experiencing meaning, reading an expression—these are the sorts of things we do, Cavell writes, when we interact with others. And it is for these reasons that Cavell writes, pa-

---

39. *Ibid.*, 356.

40. In Wittgenstein, the line appears in *Philosophical Investigations*, §25; in Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 356. Cavell continues: “Not, I feel like adding, primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul. The body is *of* the soul; it is the soul’s; a human soul *has* a human body.”

41. *Ibid.*, 371.

42. In her essay “‘We Feel Our Freedom’: Imagination and judgment in the thought of Hannah Arendt,” Linda Zerilli makes a comparable and important claim about the political value, even the necessity, of imagination: “Every extension of a political concept always involves an imaginative opening up of the world that allows us to see and articulate relations between things that have none (in any necessary, logical sense), to create relations that are external to their terms. Political relations are always external to their terms: they involve not so much the ability to subsume particulars under concepts, but an imaginative element, the ability to see or to forge new connections.” In *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 57.

renthetically, “thus may the philosophy of mind become aesthetics.”<sup>43</sup> We experience our social lives and political lives through practices of aesthetic engagement, through activities like seeing and interpreting and expressing. And political life is indeed an *experience*, something we live more than something we know. Reconceiving our relations with others as aspects of our aesthetic sensibility shifts the focus from questions about what I can or cannot know about my world and others in it to questions about what, and how, I experience my world, what I see and feel and can communicate.

Aesthetic judgments in Cavell can be characterized by what Mulhall calls “the controlled deployment of subjectivity.”<sup>44</sup> Far from being the contemplative observation of a disinterested subject,<sup>45</sup> aesthetic engagement asks us to examine our responses to art objects and test our “capacity to understand ourselves in relation to these objects.”<sup>46</sup> Aesthetic engagement is not passive and reflexive, but active and introspective, prompting us to understand and responsibly articulate the world in which we live. Mulhall continues by suggesting that the critic “must rely upon a capacity of self-knowledge and a capacity to give expression to that self-knowledge in ways which will persuade people to try to share the subjective world of her aesthetic responses which is thereby displayed.”<sup>47</sup> This is a radical claim: the idea that we can *share* our subjective worlds underscores the extent to which expressions of aesthetic judgments are not solipsistic but communal, that in giving voice to our subjective experiences we can make known that which is ostensibly private. Aesthetic judgment invites partici-

---

43. *Ibid.*, 357.

44. Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 28.

45. Forgive me for characterizing a common misreading of Kant’s view of aesthetic judgments. Those who believe that Kant views aesthetic judgment as a dispassionate reflection of detached observer might point to sentences like “judgments of taste, of themselves, do not even give rise to any interest” and “A judgment of taste [...] is merely *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object” (*Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987] 48 n. 10, 51; emphasis original). The correct reading, however, would point out that the disinterest is directed not toward the judgment itself, but toward the object; if we take an interest in the object, our judgment in taste is no longer free. For Kant, our aesthetic judgments are derived not from the object, but from the presentation of the object. Kant writes that “what matters is what I do with this presentation within myself, and not the [respect] in which I depend on the object’s existence,” and also posits that “the presentation is referred only to the subject, namely, to his feeling of life, under the name feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and this forms the basis of a very special power of discriminating and judging” (46, 44; brackets original). Cavell’s sense that aesthetic judgment has significant impact on how we understand ourselves and our relation to our world is indebted to Kant’s suggestion that aesthetic judgment refers to, shows us, helps us to feel, not the object but the presentation of the object within our own minds.

46. Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, 28.

47. *Ibid.*, 28.

pation and risks rejection, and recognizing the expression of subjectivity as a claim to community helps to explain Cavell's frequent claim that the appeal to what "we" say does not ask to be, cannot be, confirmed or denied through empirical evidence.<sup>48</sup> "The philosopher appealing to everyday language," Cavell writes, "turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say."<sup>49</sup> The community that aesthetic judgment begets goes beyond personal agreement or disagreement and asks us to actively *participate* in each other's subjective experience of the world. I invite you not just to confirm or deny my perceptions, but to hear what I hear, taste what I taste, see what I see, and, if you can, to determine whether my words would also be your words.

One of the chief criticisms of Cavell as a political thinker is that, for all he says about the importance of shared human experience, he offers little specific instruction about how to define "community": who does it include and who, if anyone, should it exclude?<sup>50</sup> Cavell might say that these aren't the sorts of questions that philosophers need to be asking, proposing instead that the philosopher speak for herself and allow her interlocutors to determine whether the philosopher speaks for them too. Yet this is precisely the sort of response that has encouraged many to relegate Cavell to the figurative sidelines of political thought, since it seems to deflect the "ought" that is so important to the work of political philosophy. Ought we, for example, denounce racism, misogyny, homophobia in those around us? If our aim to speak for ourselves in an attempt to write the autobiography of a species, hoping that others will find themselves in our words, then we have failed to distinguish ourselves from the racist, who can claim the same measure of authority from this prescription—that is, while we're busy speaking for ourselves, so the racist will be busy speaking for himself, hoping meanwhile that others will find themselves in him. Put another way, to what *extent* do we speak for ourselves? To so great an extent that we refuse to engage, confront, denounce those who, in an effort to speak for *themselves* have committed some act

---

48. Cf. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 64, 95, 220. Compare Kant's suggestion that the "universal validity" of the judgment of taste "is not to be established by gathering votes and asking other people what kind of sensation they are having; but it must rest, as it were, on an autonomy of the subject who is making a judgment about the feeling of pleasure." Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 144.

49. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 95-96.

50. These are some of the critiques that Joab Rosenburg makes in his review of Norris's *The Claim to Community* in *European Journal of Philosophy* 16.1 (2008): 153-56.

that “we” (those who don’t find ourselves in their words) recognize as morally dubious, or worse?

While there are (deliberately, on Cavell’s part) no formulaic answers to these questions, our way out of the problem begins by recognizing that Cavell’s claim to community is built implicitly upon the notion that we can speak only for ourselves, and that we cannot, *must* not, speak for others.<sup>51</sup> While the racist may purport to be speaking for himself in the hopes that others will find themselves in his words—and even when others, inevitably, find themselves there—we should recognize the racist as, in fact, speaking for others, speaking for precisely those he would denounce. The racist, the misogynist, the homophobe are committed to a politics of renunciation: the racist speaks for some only insofar as he refuses, rejects, and renounces others. In response to Espin Hammer’s suggestion that he is a political romanticist, Cavell writes that “philosophy participates in two conversations essential to the formation of a reforming polity, namely the argument of the ordinary, which I say must never be won (since in retrieving words from their exiles—of fixity, encrustation, capture, illusory or empty purity—no one has a privileged authority), as well as the conversation of justice, which I say must never be lost (specifically by being closed in citing the rules of a current institution [...]).”<sup>52</sup> We can recognize in this quote the slaveowner’s moral error: that he closes the conversation of justice by citing the rules of a current institution. Yet pointing out the slaveowner’s tautology—it’s okay to own slaves because the institution of slavery says it’s okay to own slaves—is unlikely to be persuasive. Even though we may remain unable to convince the slaveowner of his misguided morality, we might begin to recognize that his *Weltanschauung* is one in which he sees himself in a particular, and peculiar, relation to certain others; in interpreting others, the slaveowner has decided that he can, will, and even must speak for them, that his words will be the words of others. Following the practices of aesthetic interpretation that, I have been arguing, are fundamental to understanding our subjective experience of the world and mediate our interactions with others, we might point out

---

51. As Cavell puts it in *The Claim of Reason*, “The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis on which it can or has been established. [...] The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason” (20).

52. Cavell, “The Inessence and the Absence of the Political,” in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 290.

that the slaveowner speaks for his slaves to the extent that “I am your master” implies its inverse, “you are my master.”

Aesthetics can help us here because aesthetic judgments in Cavell are implicitly democratic: they turn modes of knowing, which depend upon hierarchical divisions between subject and object, into modes of interpersonal engagement and expression.<sup>53</sup> The aesthetic judgment is an *invitation*, an attempt to offer up one’s own subjectivity in the hopes that other subjectivities will see themselves there.<sup>54</sup> As Cascardi has suggested, “Criticism works in part [ ... ] as a way to disclose and to articulate, to test and to sustain, the contingency of the human that subtends the unity of experience.”<sup>55</sup> To suggest that aesthetic judgments are democratic is not to flatten or level them, not to suggest that all aesthetically motivated statements are equally valid. Quite the contrary, the democratic aspect of aesthetic judgment lies in the promise of disagreement, in the contested space that is revealed with the expression of subjectivity. But as Kant pointed out, the subjectivity we claim in our evaluations of works of art is not a solipsistic subjectivity but an interpersonal one: it is, as Cavell says of the passionate utterance, “an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the value of aesthetic judgment lies in our ability to communicate; when we say “he really *knows* the text,” appropriating the language of epistemology, we mean that he is aware of its many nuances, can direct you to its subtleties, has worked through the text as a mode of expression and has come to an awareness of his own expressive response to the text; he can help you toward a deeper understanding of the text and a more complete engagement with it. What we mean when we say that someone “knows” a work of art is that he has interpreted it well, that he has experienced its meaning, that he has read it closely, that he has engaged with it fully.

I’ve been arguing here, after Cavell, that the refusal to see others aesthetically, to engage with the other through the rationale of aesthetic judgment and appreciati-

---

53. Cf. Cavell’s suggestion that this is one of the ways in which the emphasis of his criticism differs from some (but not all) academic criticism: “I think of this emphasis as letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it,” *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 10.

54. Consider Cavell’s related claim, early in *The Claim of Reason*, that “Since the granting of consent [that you speak for me] entails acknowledgement, the withdrawal of consent entail the same acknowledgement: I have to say *both* ‘It is not mine any longer’ (I am no longer responsible for it, it no longer speaks for me) *and* ‘It is no longer ours’ (not what we bargained for, we no longer recognize the principle of consent in it, the original ‘we’ is no longer bound together by consent but only by force, so it no longer exists)” (27).

55. Cascardi, “Cavell and Kant,” 57.

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

on, is a refusal to recognize their humanity. Or, perhaps more accurately, that it is aesthetic sensibility that can bridge relations between people: not that I should see you as an aesthetic object, but that our relations with and towards other people should mirror those that we take towards aesthetic objects, that we seek to read them, understand them, engage with them fully and on their terms.<sup>57</sup> Cavell suggests of aesthetic judgments “that the familiar lack of conclusiveness in aesthetic argument, rather than showing up an irrationality, shows the kind of rationality it has, and needs.”<sup>58</sup> The same is true of political judgments: the slaveowner accepts his own tautological justification for slavery, bearing witness to the fact that rational argument cannot persuade him to abandon slavery. And yet this is not therefore evidence of the slaveowner’s irrationality or insanity. Recognizing that the slaveowner sees the world *this* way, and understands his place in it *thus*, we need an attentive understanding of how his world differs from ours, and a patient ability to put on display the nuance of our world; perhaps most importantly, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we may, after all this, fail to get him to see, and that our failure here is not therefore justification to stop trying. Early in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, Cavell explicitly labels Kant’s aesthetic judgment as a form of passionate utterance, before expanding: “One person, risking exposure to rebuff, singles out another, through the expression of an emotion and claim of value, to respond in kind, that is, with appropriate emotion and action (if mainly of speech), here and now.”<sup>59</sup> It’s in his emphasis on aesthetic judgment as exposure, as expressions of emotion and claims of value, that aesthetic judgment might come to inform or inflect political discourse; and it’s in his appeal to community, in the invitation or provocation or plain longing for a proper emotional response, that Cavell makes manifest the ways in which claims to aesthetic affection are necessarily communal and that aesthetics comes to mean little if it cannot be shared between people, or at the very least if it doesn’t prompt an expression that seeks to bridge subjectivities.

At the same time, Cavell is not interested in understanding art or artworks as modes of political resistance. If what I’ve been describing here is a sort of reversal of

---

57. As a converse to what I’ve been arguing here, we might think of Cavell’s suggestion in “Music Discomposed” that artworks matter to us in much the same way that people matter to us. See *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 197-98.

58. *Ibid.*, 86.

59. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 26.

Benjamin's notion of the aestheticization of politics—if I'm describing a politicization of aesthetics—then, insofar as this describes part of Cavell's aims, this has little to do with the political implications of engaging with art, or the political value of art criticism. Rather, Cavell is interested in understanding the ways in which political engagement draws upon modes of aesthetic understanding: not in arguing that aesthetics *should be* political, but in understanding the ways in which our interactions with others rely upon the same faculties of reason and experiences of emotion as our interactions with works of art. His appeals to community are political in the broadest sense, in that he sees in art the opportunity to come to deeper understanding about our place in the world and our relation to others in it. Engaging in a work of art and being able to identify—and defend—what you see there is a way of recognizing your own subjectivity and the subjectivity of another viewer. And yet critically, this recognition of subjectivity becomes, for Cavell, an invitation to express something about yourself and your world, and an invitation to get others to see what you see. For this is what the slaveowner misses about the slave: not that the slave is human, and not that the slave is capable of understanding, but that the slave is capable of improvising in the disorders of desire.

## Friend as Enemy: Notes on Cavell and Socialism (Via Makavejev)

RASTISLAV DINIĆ

Richard Rorty famously claimed that the difference between analytic and continental philosophers, boils down to a political one—analytical philosophers are predominantly liberals who share a belief in the rule of law and the institutions of modern constitutional democracy, while the continental ones tend to be more pessimistic about this political arrangement, and much more prone to experiment with the alternatives<sup>1</sup>. But where does this leave the members of that rare breed—philosophers who see themselves as working in both traditions? In order to answer that question for himself, Rorty has written several books proclaiming his faith in liberalism and America as its most prominent example. But what about Stanley Cavell—a philosopher inspired equally by Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austen, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger? It is difficult to answer this question straightforwardly, since, although many of his writings are in some sense deeply political, Cavell rarely wrote explicitly on politics, especially in respect of modern ideological struggles. One way someone interested in this question could go about trying to answer it is by turning to Cavell’s encounters with more explicit representatives of certain ideological positions. That is exactly what I intend to do in this paper—by turning to Cavell’s engagement with Yugoslav director Dušan Makavejev.

The cinema of Makavejev has recently been the subject of a resurgent interest among film theorists.<sup>2</sup> In a recent scholarly outpour on the filmmaker, Cavell article

---

1. Richard Rorty, “Philosophy in America Today”, in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 229.

2. Pavle Levi, *A Disintegration in Flames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Lorraine Mortimer, *Terror and Joy: The Films of Dušan Makavejev* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008); Boris Buden, “Behind the Velvet Curtain. Remembering Dušan Makavejev’s *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 18 (2008): 118-126; *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 5.1 (2014).

on the director, “On Mavkavejev on Bergman” is a frequent, almost canonical reference, and still most film theorists rarely engage in a close reading or substantial re-interpretation of his views on Makavejev’s filmmaking. A notable exception to such treatment of Cavell one finds in Sezgin Boynik’s, “On Makavejev, On Ideology - The Concrete and the Abstract in the Readings of Dušan Makavejev’s Films”. In his text, Boynik argues against what he calls humanist interpretations of Makavejev’s films, which are in his opinion crucially indebted to Cavell.

“He was a true Red Fascist!” These are the last words of Milena, describing Vladimir in *WR*. Red Fascism as the merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American image of totalitarianism is a political terminology par excellence. It has played a crucial role in post-WWII America, constructing the policy of anti-communism which was paved through the troubled equivalency of Hitler with Stalin. Apart from generating the discourse on the acuteness of the task to fight communism, Red Fascism also served the fantasies of what might happen. For example, we have to look at Hitler in the 1930s in order to avoid a possible coming of Stalin’s Fascism. This fantasy is somehow at the core of totalitarian ideology, as a bizarre psychopathological paranoid state that confuses the abstract and the real. This is how Stanley Cavell in his article on Makavejev describes the archive materials of the ultimate evil of Stalinism, or the Katyn Forest massacre shown in *Sweet Movie* [1974], as a “dreamlike sequence” and poses the great moralist question that a freedom lover would: “Isn’t that forest a name for the region inhabited by regimes that no longer know that there is a difference between dream and reality, acting out the one, wiping out the other?” Stalin mistook the concrete for the abstract, and according to his critics it is this confusion that makes him so uncanny.<sup>3</sup>

This passage explicates most succinctly Boynik’s reading of Cavell’s position on ideology—and this it does by labeling Cavell as one more representative of the *tota-*

---

3. Sezgin Boynik, “On Makavejev, On Ideology - The Concrete and the Abstract in the Readings of Dušan Makavejev’s Films,” in *Surfing the Black: Yugoslav Black Wave and its Transgressive Moments*, ed. Gal Kirn et al. (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012), 144.

*litarian paradigm*. According to him, Cavell does not only subscribes to the anti-communist consensus which equates Fascism and Stalinism as the two totalitarisms, but argues that what makes a murderous—or totalitarian—regime is confusing “the abstract and the real,” or conversely “the abstract and the concrete”. Apparently, in opposition to these regimes which get blinded by ideology, thus ending in killing concrete and real individuals, Cavell advocates American liberalism which puts individuals and their freedom first and foremost—Boynik is not explicit on that point, but as much can be deduced from the sarcastic remark about Cavell as “freedom lover”.

I believe this view of Cavell as a sort of Isaiah Berlin type of Cold War apologist of negative liberty and American-style liberalism to be deeply mistaken. Not because Cavell does not see himself as an American or as a liberal—as I will show, he clearly does—but because his view of America and liberalism on one side, and of the socialist alternative, on the other is much more complex than that of the Cold War ideologues such as George Kennan (with whom Boynik also compares him), and even of the serious liberal philosophers such as Berlin.

Let us start from the Katyn Forest, and the role it plays in Makavejev’s film, and the reading of it Cavell offers in his text. The documentary footage depicting the excavations of the victims from the Katyn Forest is shown without any comment and at the very end of it a quote is shown, from a letter of Sir Owen O’Malley, the British ambassador in Poland, to Anthony Eden: “Let us think of these things always and speak of them never.” Cavell writes:

The conscience of *Sweet Movie* is most hideously captured in a sequence of literal excavation—the Nazi documentary footage of German troops exhuming bodies from mass graves in the Katyn Forest. A lifelong participant in a society of declared socialist aspirations, Makavejev is asking: Was my revolution capable even of this? Has it cannibalized everything that has touched it? Is it true that the Red Army committed a mass murder of the Polish officer corps? The film shows a card which contains Anthony Eden's response to this news: "Let us think of these things always. Let us speak of them never." For Makavejev, that conspiracy of silence, call it mass hypocrisy, is a prescription for self-ad-

ministered mass death. Mere film alone cannot prove who caused and buried the corpses in the Katyn Forest, but this film directly refuses the conspiracy of silence about it.<sup>4</sup>

Cavell obviously gives a prominent place in his interpretation to the already mentioned quote (although he mistakenly ascribes it to Eden, instead to O'Malley—no doubt a sign of the time when film interpretations were still based on strength of personal memory, instead on the technologies such as VHS and DVD which make every scene in the movie always readily available to the interpreter). This quote is a sign of the conspiracy of silence that Makavejev stands up against. But—tellingly—the source of this quote is not Soviet—it is British. Thus, this conspiracy of silence does not stop at the borders of the Eastern Bloc, but inevitably implicates liberal democracy—the very regime that, according to Boynik, the “freedom lover” Cavell is uncritically embracing. (Small wonder that Boynik does not even mention this quote, nor its importance either for Cavell, or for Makavejev).

Having that in mind—a different reading of Cavell's claim that Katyn is “a name for the region inhabited by regimes that no longer know that there is a difference between dream and reality, acting out the one, wiping out the other”<sup>5</sup> forces itself upon us. These regimes seem to be not only Fascism and Stalinism, but all regimes prepared to wipe out reality in the name of a fantasy, including it seems, the one which, although not directly involved in the massacre—is prepared to repress any discussion of it in the name of *Realpolitik*. And was not the Katyn massacre, more than an ideological crime, actually a crime of *Realpolitik*—a politics which believes itself to be *the most real* of all, completely non-deluded by utopian or moralist concerns<sup>6</sup> (exactly this, then, being its fantasy)? And if so, could not its

---

4. Cavell, “On Makavejev on Bergman,” *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1979), 313.

5. *Ibid.*, 322.

6. “It has been suggested that the motive for this terrible step was to reassure the Germans as to the reality of Soviet anti-Polish policy. This explanation is completely unconvincing in view of the care with which the Soviet regime kept the massacre secret from the very German government it was supposed to impress. [...] A more likely explanation is that [...] this step should be seen as looking forward to a future in which there might again be a Poland on the Soviet Union's western border. Since he intended to keep the eastern portion of the country in any case, Stalin could be certain that any revived Poland would be unfriendly. Under those circumstances, depriving it of a large proportion of its military and technical elite would make it weaker.” Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 107.

name, just as easily, be Hiroshima, or Vietnam?<sup>7</sup>

The whole passage from O'Malley's letter, from which the mentioned quote is taken, is especially telling:

Let us think of these things always and speak of them never. To speak of them never is the advice which I have been giving to the Polish Government, but it has been unnecessary. They have received the Soviet report in silence. Affliction and residence in this country seem to be teaching them how much better it is in political life to leave unsaid those things about which one feels most passionately.<sup>8</sup>

The view of politics, in which it is better (in politics) not to speak about things about which one feels most passionately has of course, been a recurring target of Cavell's criticism in many of his political writings, but most prominently in his essay on Rawls, "The Conversation of Justice: Rawls and the Drama of Consent."<sup>9</sup> There, Cavell criticizes Rawlsian liberalism exactly on the account of closing off politics and political conversation for what one feels most passionately about<sup>10</sup>.

Of course, Rawls is no proponent of *Realpolitik*, far from it. But, what is missing from his account is precisely the account of how the departures from ideal justice (that is, real politics) influence our consent. As Cavell writes:

The idea of directing consent to the principles on which society is based rather than, as it were, to society as such, seems to be or to lead to an effort to imagine confining or proportioning the consent I give my society—to imagine that the social contract not only states in effect that I may withdraw my consent

---

7. On America's engagement in Vietnam Cavell writes that America "is killing itself and killing another country in order not to acknowledge its helplessness in the face of suffering, in order not to acknowledge its separateness", Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 345.

8. Owen O'Malley, "Dispatches of the British Ambassador to Poland," *Electronic Museum*, accessed July 31, 2014, [http://www.electronicmuseum.ca/Poland-WW2/katyn\\_memorial\\_wall/o%27malley\\_despatches/o%27malley\\_despatches\\_3.html](http://www.electronicmuseum.ca/Poland-WW2/katyn_memorial_wall/o%27malley_despatches/o%27malley_despatches_3.html).

9. Cavell, "The Conversation of Justice: Rawls and the Drama of Consent," in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 101-26.

10. See Stephen Mulhall, "Promising, Consent, and Citizenship: Rawls and Cavell on Morality and Politics," *Political Theory* 25 (1997), 171-192.

from society when the public institutions of justice lapse in favor of which I have foregone certain natural rights (of judgment and redress) but that the contract might, in principle, specify how far I may reduce my consent (in scope or degree) as justice is reduced (legislatively or judicially). But my intuition is that my consent is not thus modifiable or proportionable (psychological exile is not exile): I cannot keep consent focused on the success or graces of society; it reaches into every corner of society's failure or ugliness. Between a society approaching strict compliance with the principles of justice and one approaching causes of civil disobedience, there is ground on which existent constitutional democracies circumscribe everyday lives. We know that the original position has prepared us for, what the lifted veil of ignorance has disclosed: the scene of our lives. The public circumstances in which I live, in which I participate, and from which I profit, are ones I consent to. They are ones with an uncertain measure of liberty and of goods that are not minimal, of delays in reform that are not inevitable. Consent to society is neither unrestricted *nor* restricted; its content is part of the conversation of justice.<sup>11</sup>

How do these ruminations on Rawls, a prominent *liberal* philosopher, tie in with Cavell's discussion of Makavejev? The guiding thought of this passage is already present in the essay on Makavejev. As Cavell sees it—one of Makavejev's main themes is exactly how to react to what he calls (in the Rawls essay) "society's ugliness" if we have already consented to that society, *the whole of society*, and not just its principles and ideals, be they Rawlsian, or Marxist. According to Cavell, Makavejev's discovery lies in our capability to be disgusted by the world, or by what has been done, or is being done in our name, in the name of society we have consented to:

The discovery of adulthood through disgust was something acted out in the student movement in the time of our war in Vietnam. To perform ugly and indecent acts was an expression of the rejection of a world that asked for consent to its disgusting deeds. This was not my way of expression, partly because I had already given my consent to this world and partly because I do not unders-

---

11. Cavell, "The Conversation of Justice," 108.

tand myself as performing ugly and indecent acts. But I understand that way, I felt the exactness of its spiritual accuracy. To say so was my way, and it has its own price. This is or was so obvious that serious films made during that period did not so much need to assert disgust with the world as to ask for its assessment, to acknowledge this fact of the world without letting it sap the motivation to work at this art, even if the art itself was the best context for the assessment. [...] Alceste's interpretation of the uninhabitability of the world, that is, of his distaste, is to see the world as a scene of universal hypocrisy. *Sweet Movie* interprets this hypocrisy, as it were, by picturing the earth as full of corpses-buried evidence of mass murder, rotting ideals, corpses with souls still in them. The film attempts to extract hope—to claim to divine life after birth—from the very fact that we are capable of genuine disgust at the world; that our revoltedness is the chance for a cleansing revulsion; that we may purge ourselves by living rather than by killing, willing to visit hell if that is the direction to something beyond purgatory; that the fight for freedom continues to originate in the demands of our instincts, the chaotic cry of our nature, our cry to have a nature. It is a work powerful enough to encourage us to see again that the tyrant's power continues to require our complicitous tyranny over ourselves. [...] In my earlier essay I more or less accuse both Alceste and Othello of inviting Montaigne's terrible rebuke to mankind in "On some verses of Virgil": "What a monstrous animal to be a horror to himself, to be burdened by his pleasures, to regard him-self as a misfortune!" But I go on to say—something I take *Sweet Movie* to be saying—that the world during my lifetime rather shows that it is yet more horrible to lose this capacity for horror.<sup>12</sup>

This parallel is interesting and important for our discussion in more ways than one—first, it shows that the problematic of consent arises both in liberal societies (which are explicitly built on the myth of consent, or a version of *consent theory*) and in societies of communist aspirations such as Makavejev's Yugoslavia. What inhabitants of both of these types of societies have to face is a sort of hypocrisy, or discrepancy between the ideal justice towards which their societies, each in its own way, strive for

---

12. Cavell, "On Makavejev on Bergman," 319.

(or by which they legitimize themselves) and the less than ideal (and sometimes positively murderous) practice. Here, the two types of society causing a similar type of response—disgust—are explicitly compared, with the example of Vietnam war, and the reactions of students who “used disgusting acts” to show their disgust towards the society which was asking for their consent. Cavell claims that, although he understood their reaction, he could not take part in it (since he already consented to his society)—but that he wrote about it and that way showed his own disgust toward what was happening. In this way he is akin to Makavejev—who shows us the Muehl commune (the commune of those who do not want to give their consent), but does not join it himself. As we will see, that is because, like Cavell, Makavejev has already consented to his society and his films represent his own mode of response to *that* society’s “ugliness”. What both share, however, is a refusal to limit their consent to the high ideals of their society, and a preparedness to take responsibility for its uglier aspects.

Here it is already quite obvious why the comparison that Boynik insists on—between socialism (or communism) and fascism will not do as an interpretation of Cavell’s views. For it is fundamentally impossible for an inhabitant of a fascist regime to consent to its principles, but not to its murderousness. It is impossible for a hypocrisy Makavejev and Cavell focus on, even to exist in a fascist society, in which there is no striving for ideal justice at all. (Numerous examples of citizens of fascist states who later claimed they did not know what was being done in their name, do not go against this—for our disbelief in their claims stems exactly from the fact is that even if they did not know about the particular cases of crimes—they could not have not known that the very principles they consented to were murderous themselves ). *Realpolitik* is not the flipside of the fascist societies, but their self-proclaimed guiding principle.

But—what are we to make of Makavejev’s “true Red Fascist”? Boynik makes a strange move by ascribing the equation of Stalinism with Fascism, not to Makavejev himself, but to Cavell, whose interpretation of this provocative line he does not even mention (although, as we will see—not because Cavell does not offer such an interpretation—he does.)

First, let us see how Makavejev treats this line, and what work it does in his film. After Milena has been killed by Vladimir Illich, her severed head, lying on the pathologist's desks, starts speaking into the camera, that is to us—the audience—thus:

Cosmic rays [...] streamed through our carnal bodies. We pulsed to the vibrations of the universe. But he couldn't bear it. He had to go one step further. Vladimir is a man of noble impetuosity [...] a man of high ambition [...] of immense energy. He's romantic [...] ascetic [...] a genuine Red Fascist! Comrades [...] even now I'm not ashamed of my Communist past!<sup>13</sup>

Cavell comments on this scene in the following way:

In the absence of gods, what WR tells us is that this woman lost her head to love because of a mortal who had already been turned to stone; that she was made a monster, a talking head without a body, or confirmed in monstrosity, by a man who interpreted his purity as demanding that he exempt himself from ordinary human desires, save himself for something higher. The woman's words for this—that is, the talking head's words, I mean of course Makavejev's words—are "He's romantic, ascetic, a genuine Red Fascist," a patriot. Makavejev's further identification with this murderousness, his refusal to exempt himself from recognizing it in himself (in accordance, no doubt, with his own romanticism and asceticism and his patriotism toward a still invisible fatherland) is his further interpretation of the man's self-exemption as the capacity for art. [...] This is shown in the man's beautiful song of prayer as he walks lost along the river, comprising the closing sequence of this film. Makavejev thus discovers further adjacencies in the concept of art as we have it, art as decapitation or renunciation or alienation; and he bears out the knowledge that this art is at the same time the victim or martyr of the very circumstances that produce it.<sup>14</sup>

---

13. In *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971).

14. Cavell, "On Makvejev on Bergman," 329-30.

There are several interesting points in Cavell's reading of the scene. For starters, according to him—Makavejev does not exempt himself from the “recognizing the murderousness in himself”. This seems to be clearly on the mark, for, as we have seen, Milena's head (who is speaking for the author of the film, but also for Wilhelm Reich)—defiantly refuses to renounce her “communist past.” Furthermore, all the attributes (romantic, ascetic ) Milena ascribes to Vladimir Ilich, Cavell ascribes to Makavejev ; all except one—fascist Instead of that, Cavell tellingly adds one attribute which is not (literally) present in Milena's soliloquy—patriotism “towards a still invisible fatherland”.

Those familiar with Cavell's opus might recognize this “still invisible fatherland” as an echo of Emerson's phrase which Cavell used as a title of his 1988 book - *This New Yet Unapproachable America*.<sup>15</sup> The sentence originates from Emerson's essay *Experience*, and Cavell discusses at length why the America Emerson speaks of might be “yet unapproachable”, and comes to the conclusion that it is unapproachable because it has yet to be found, but that its finding requires what Emerson calls *aversion*, or what is more commonly known as *conversion*, a turning away from our current state, which Emerson's writing itself is supposed to exemplify. Writes Cavell:

Then Emerson's writing is (an or promise of, the constitution for) this new yet unapproachable America: his aversion is a rebirth of himself into it (there will be other rebirths), its presence to us is unapproachable, both because there is nowhere *else* to go to find it, we have to turn toward it, reverse ourselves; and because we do not know if our presence to it is peopling it. [...] The identification this writer proposes between his individual constitution and the constitution of his nation is a subject on its own. The endlessly repeated idea that Emerson was only interested in finding the individual should give way of founding a nation, writing its constitution, constituting its citizens. But then would the writer say “I found” (a new America) as if in answer to the opening question, “Where do we find?” (ourselves). If we consider that what we now know, know now, of this writer, that say we and that say I, then wherever he is

---

15. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989).

we are—otherwise how can we hear him? Do we? Does his character make an impression on us? Has he achieved a new degree of culture?<sup>16</sup>

As Roger Griffin notes in his famous essay on fascism, there is something disturbing for the liberal ear, about the idea of the birth and rebirth of a nation, and Griffin ascribes that idea to the “core” of fascist ideology.<sup>17</sup> While it is clear that there are many deep differences between Emerson’s individualism and any form of ethnic or cultural organicism, Cavell seems to be very aware of the charge that Emersonian perfectionism is “smoothing the way for fascism,”<sup>18</sup> and has repeatedly returned to debunking it. In one of his most important pieces on Emerson, “Aversive Thinking,”<sup>19</sup> Cavell gives an elaborate argument against what he sees as Rawls’ mistaken rejection of Nietzsche’s, and *pace* Nietzsche, Emerson’s, perfectionism as inherently anti-democratic. While he admits that it is tempting to read both Emerson and Nietzsche as exalting great men, and dismissing the importance of the slavish majority (which is seen as “bugs”, “spawn”, “mob”, “herd”), he insists that there is a better and more consistent way of reading them as speaking not of particular great men, but rather of the possibility of each person for attaining her “unattained but attainable self”, for being consecrated to culture. This possibility lies in being disgusted with oneself and one’s current state and finding a way for turning away from it, from where we find ourselves at the given moment. Not only is such a possibility in principle open to everyone and hence not necessarily anti-democratic, but, Cavell claims, according to Emerson it is necessary for democracy’s survival:

There are undeniably aristocratic or aesthetic perfectionisms. But in Emerson it should, I would like to say, be taken as part of the training for democracy. [...] I understand the training and character and friendship Emerson requires for democracy as preparation to withstand not its rigors, but its failures, character to keep the democratic hope alive in the face of disappointment with it. [...] That we will be disappointed in democracy, in its failure by the lights of its

---

16. *Ibid.*, 92.

17. Roger Griffin, “Fascism: General Introduction,” in *Fascist Studies: New Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 118.

18. Cavell, “The Conversation of Justice,” 102.

19. Cavell, “Aversive Thinking,” in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.

own principles of justice, is implied in Rawls' concept of the original position in which those principles are accepted, a perspective from which we know that justice, in actual societies, will be departed from, and that the distance of any actual society from justice is a matter for each of us to assess for ourselves. I will speak of this as our being compromised by the democratic demand for consent, so that the human individual meant to be created and preserved in democracy is apt to be undone by it.<sup>20</sup>

And here, we reach the point we have already mentioned—of facing disappointment with the ideals of justice we have consented to. Going back to Boynik's claims, we may now safely say that Cavell does not evoke the "Red Fascist" in order to equate the *two totalitarianisms*. On the contrary—Cavell replaces the word fascist with what he sees to be a better fit, "patriotism for a still invisible fatherland"—a perfectionism that he subscribes to himself, and which, though mistaken for fascism by an indiscriminate eye (which, as it turns out, might even be an eye of a great philosopher such as Rawls), is actually not only compatible with democracy, but fundamentally important for it.

Boynik also misinterprets the link that Cavell establishes between Marx and Jung, claiming that in Makavejev's film "the world of Marx is healed by the parapsychology of Jung". But, as we will see, this is a very superficial reading of what Cavell actually says.

Let us start from the way Cavell uses the two quotations:

The center of the action of the commune sequence is a communal meal, a feast whose ritualization strikes me as possessing, for all its confusion of tongues, a working solemnity. I think of Marx's characterization of religion as the heart of a heartless world, and I ask myself what the things of acceptance and redemption might look like to those who would actually bring such concepts to earth—as if inventing them and giving them a heart. I had not liked Makavejev's complaint that Bergman's "conception of God, especially, the God who does not love people and who makes them unexplainably miserable, seems to me incomprehensible and gratuitous for a serious artist." If this is bad for a serious artist, I felt, it is bad for any human being; but is it a matter over which human

---

20. Ibid., 52.

beings have a choice? But I also felt that Makavejev is meeting Bergman at once on Bergman's ground and on Marx's: "The critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique." What Makavejev sees in religion and how he effects his critique of it will come up again. (Since in the working of this film and in the mode of thinking it exemplifies, apt conjunction is everything, allowing the mutual excavation of concepts, I shall quote from the early pages of C. G. Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, without comment [as if one might use a quotation within the body of a text, that is, after the text has begun, as what you may call an internal epigraph] some fragments from his interpretation of "the earliest dream I can remember, a dream which was to preoccupy me all my life": "At all events, the phallus of this dream seems to be a subterranean God 'not to be named,' and such it remained throughout my youth, reappearing whenever anyone spoke too emphatically about Lord Jesus. [...] The fear of the 'black man,' which is felt by every child, was not the essential thing in that experience; it was, rather, the recognition that stabbed through my childish brain: 'That is a Jesuit.' So the important thing in the dream was its remarkable symbolic setting and the astounding interpretation: 'That is the man-eater.' [...] In the dream I went down into the hole in the earth and found something very different on a golden throne, something non-human and underworldly, which gazed fixedly upward and fed on human flesh. It was only fifty years later that a passage in a study of religious ritual burned into my eyes, concerning the motif of cannibalism that underlies the symbolism of the Mass [...]. Through this childhood dream I was initiated into the secrets of the earth. What happened then was a kind of burial in the earth, and many years were to pass before I came out again. Today I know that it happened in order to bring the greatest possible amount of light into the darkness. It was an initiation into the realm of darkness. My intellectual life had its unconscious beginnings at that time.")<sup>21</sup>

Right at the beginning it should be noted that there are two Marx's thoughts Cavell references, while Boynik only mentions one. The other, that Boynik misses is the fa-

---

21. Cavell, "On Makavejev on Bergman", 315-16.

mous quote about criticism of religion being the prerequisite of every criticism. This thought appears again in Cavell's essay on Rawls. There, he notes

Ibsen's participation in a perception shared by Marx and Emerson and Nietzsche, that "the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticism." When Marx used those words he prefaced them by claiming that in Germany the criticism of religion is essentially complete, while Nietzsche a generation later will show it to be still beginning, as Emerson had in effect, shown him.<sup>22</sup>

In this light, the significance of Jung's quote becomes much clearer—Jung is not invoked to "heal Marx's world", but, just the opposite, to show that the task Marx thought was complete was still before us—the criticism of religion. In this sense, Jung's dream proves Nietzsche and Emerson to be right, the "struggle with one's own inner priest, one's priestly nature"<sup>23</sup> is still far from over. And it is hardly a miracle that it is not—for unredeemed suffering still exists, both in liberal and in Marxist societies. The Muehl commune brings up this thought for Cavell, because it presents a secular way of coming to terms with this fact, just as *Sweet Movie* itself is such an attempt to be reborn, not into another world but into this one, to show that there is "life after birth."<sup>24</sup> As Cavell writes: "Perfectionism, as represented in Emerson and in Nietzsche, we are invited to a position that is structurally one of martyrdom: not, however, in view of the divine but in inspiration to an idea of the human."<sup>25</sup>

In another telling passage, Boynik denounces Charles Warren, whom he previously characterized as continuing Cavell's "humanist" reading of Makavejev, for the claim: "Yugoslavia is not the USSR and it resists Stalinism. Milena tells to Vladimir that Yugoslavs care about 'personal happiness' and do not blur that with State concerns,"<sup>26</sup> but does not recognize the clear Marxian reference of the line from Makavejev's movie—"The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the

22. Cavell, "The Conversation of Justice," 111.

23. Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 138.

24. Cavell, "On Makavejev on Bergman," 319.

25. Cavell, "Aversive Thinking," 56.

26. Charles Warren, "Earth and Beyond: Dušan Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of Organism*", in *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 206. Cited in Boynik, "On Makavejev on Ideology," 143.

demand for their *real* happiness.”<sup>27</sup> The pursuit of happiness has of course been a longstanding topic for Cavell, as well as the importance of persisting in it in the face of human suffering<sup>28</sup>. What Cavell and Makavejev note, and Boynik misses—is that the challenge of illusory happiness is still with us, and in that sense, so is religion—even if we live in nominally secular (whether liberal or socialist) societies.

Stephen Mulhall deftly summarizes Cavell’s position on moral argument by noting that for Cavell such an argument may be rational even though not necessarily leading to consensus. We may agree on standards of pertinence of different considerations, but still disagree about the weight we attach to them, while at the same time recognizing each others’ position as rational and worthy of respect:

In Cavell’s eyes, contemporary moral argument is a domain which admits of many morally adequate positions being taken on any given topic; and as a result, the particular position a given individual takes up reveals as much about her as the action or judgment under consideration. In this sense, moral argument is both objective [...] and subjective [...]: it allows people to define and defend the position for which they are prepared to take responsibility, and it allows those others to determine whether that position is one they can respect.<sup>29</sup>

Mulhall concludes that this account of rationality in morals is primarily fit for private morality, “its paradigm is an encounter between two people who wish to understand one another better and perhaps work toward an agreement, but whose relationship is clearly an intimate one,” and adds that such a model is clearly “ill-suited to the domain of public political morality.”<sup>30</sup>

But what if Cavell’s engagement with Makavejev is an example of just such a relationship? Read this way—it can be seen as a perfectionist encounter between two

---

27. Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” 131.

28. See Cavell’s discussion of remarriage comedies and his arguments against them being just “fairy tales for the Depression.” Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3.

29. Stephen Mulhall, “Liberalism, Morality and Rationality: Macintyre, Rawls and Cavell,” in *After Macintyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 214.

30. *Ibid.*, 214.

individuals whose friendship “includes the inflection of friend as [...] enemy”, contesting each other’s (each other’s societies’) present attainments<sup>31</sup>. At one point, Cavell asks himself why it is not the real issue for both a socialist and a liberal, to “understand what happened to the fact and the idea of liberty under Americanization and to understand what happened to the idea and fact of community under Sovietization”<sup>32</sup>. Each society, he seems to imply, is failing “by the lights of its own principles of justice”. Each idea is being compromised by political practice, thus compromising both the socialist and the liberal who have consented to their respective societies, that is—both Makavejev and Cavell. Still, they both continue to give consent to their societies, “on pain of self-corruption worse than compromise,” relying only on their intuitions that “our collective distance from perfect justice is, though in moments painful to the limits of intolerable, still habitable, even necessary as a stage for continued change.”<sup>33</sup> Whose intuition is more accurate? Although obviously not neutral (or maybe exactly because he is not neutral), Cavell does not even try to adjudicate between the two positions. In the future, they may come closer together, striking a shared balance between liberty and community, or they may just continue to strive for change each in its own way. What Cavell makes abundantly clear, however, is that Makavejev’s position is one that he can respect.

---

31. “To see Emerson’s philosophical authorships taking up the ancient position of the friend, we have to include the inflection (more brazen in Nietzsche but no less explicit in Emerson) of my friend as my enemy (contesting my present attainments.” Cavell, “Aversive Thinking,” 59.

32. Cavell, “On Makavejev on Bergman,” 315.

33. Cavell, “Conversation of Justice,” 112.

## The Malick Viewed: Is there any Cinematic Heir to Cavell's Philosophical Thinking Today?

BABAK GERANFAR

The question of the relation between Film and philosophy has been at the center of many intellectual debates since the foundation of cinema. It has been paraphrased and articulated in many disciplines such as Philosophy of Film, Film-Philosophy, Philosophy of Motion Pictures, Philosophy of Moving Images, even Film Theory. Nevertheless, as much as the technical aspects of the movies developed rapidly, the philosophical questions around it became more and more specific and the answers became more fallible by the end of the day. If you could agree before with some of the ontological conclusions of Bazin, Deleuze, Badiou or Cavell about celluloid-based Film, you certainly can not share that agreement to generalize that to the kind of digital imagery that we call 'Film' today, nor can you justify the Hologram or 3D IMAX footage as constituents of a motion picture. The irony is that the old question, 'what is Film?', is as often and as rapidly revised as the question, "what is philosophy?"

The fact that some Filmmakers today had proper training as philosophers as much as Filmmakers leads us to hope for an actual humane bridge between these two sides. Can we find a Filmmaker—or several—who have inherited a specific mode of philosophical thinking? Is there anybody out there who makes Films philosophically? You can be certain that one name who pops up on everyone's list is Terrence Malick. After all, he was a direct pupil of Stanley Cavell's, in philosophy, at Harvard and translated and published Heidegger's *Essence of Reason* to English. Unlike his mentor, who firmly believes that the mode of thinking you can find in certain Hollywood movies common in the 30s and 40s is a direct inheritance from the American Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau and late blooming of European Romanticism in America, Malick exploits high concept material and modern elliptical modes of expression which are rarely rendered on Film.

Like Malick, Cavell's readings have also been an exception to the trend of the figures who dwell on the realm of Film and Philosophy. We can easily call him a Philosopher of Film too; after all, Cavell dedicated a whole book to discussing the ontology of Film (*The World Viewed*) and in two different books, he grounded his own intuitional reading of genre (which is categorized today as "Remarriage Comedies" and "Melodramas of Unknown Women") even in Film literature. He further expanded his meditations on Television and Opera. Even in "Cities of Words," he read many of the classical Hollywood movies of 30s and 40s as companion texts to essential texts of philosophy of ethics. His use of autobiographical methods gave him credibility in using the Ordinary Language Philosophy of J.L. Austin and the later Wittgenstein to describe our experiences of watching movies. In a passage from "More of The World Viewed," he gives a fragmentary reading of some fragments of Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978):

I think the Film does indeed contain a metaphysical vision of the world; but I think that one has never quite seen the scene of human existence—call it the arena between earth (or days) and heaven—quite realized this way on Film before.

The particular mode of beauty these images somehow invokes a formal radiance which strikes me as a realization of some sentences from Heidegger's "What is Called Thinking?" (Harper Torchback, 1972).<sup>1</sup>

When we say "Being," it means "Being of beings." When we say "beings," it means "beings in respect of Being." [...] The duality is always a prior datum, for Parmenides as much as for Plato, Kant as much as Nietzsche [...]. An interpretation decisive for Western thought is that given by Plato [...]. Plato means to say: beings and Beings are in different places. Particular beings and Beings are differently located.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), xiv-xv.

2. *Ibid.*, 227.

According to Plato, the idea constitutes the Being of a being. The idea is the face whereby a given something shows its form, looks at us, and thus appears, for instance, as this table. In this form, the thing looks at us. [...] Now Plato designates the relation of a given being to its idea as participation.<sup>3</sup>

The first service man can render is to give thought to the Being of beings [...]. The word [being] says: presence of what is present.<sup>4</sup>

The presence we described gathers itself in the continuance which causes a mountain, a sea, a house to endure and, by that duration, to lie before us among other things that are present [...]. The Greeks experience such duration as a luminous appearance in the sense of illumined radiant self-manifestation.<sup>5</sup>

If Malick has indeed found a way to transpose such thoughts for our meditation, he can have done it only, it seems to me, by having discovered, or discovered how to acknowledge, a fundamental fact of Film's photographic basis: that objects participate in the photographic presence of themselves: they participate in the re-creation of themselves on Film; they are essential in the making of their appearances. Objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins.

Their presence refers to their absence, their location in another place. Then if in relation to objects capable of such self-manifestation human beings are reduced in significance, or crushed by the fact of beauty left vacant, perhaps this is because in trying to take domination over the world, or in aestheticizing it (temptations inherent in the making of Film, or of any art), they are refusing their participation with it.<sup>6</sup>

If the question of finding a humane bridge between two disciplines seemed absurd, its existence is now undeniable after Malick's masterpieces. That mode of creation,

---

3. Ibid., 222.

4. Ibid., 235.

5. Ibid., 237.

6. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), xvi.

which Cavell emphasises, becomes central in Malick's other works (most notably in *Tree of Life* [2011] and *The Voyage of Time: Life's Journey* [2016]). One easily finds how reduced characters are in significance (they are normally wandering and barely talking) in relation to the objects capable of self-manifestation (*To the Wonder* [2012], *Song to Song* [2017], *Knight of Cups* [2015]) and crushed by beauty left vacant (*The New World* [2005] and *The Thin Red Line* [1998]).

If anyone has found a way to transpose Cavell's thoughts on film for "our meditative pleasure," it is Malick who did it first. He is the one who has discovered how to acknowledge that his thoughts can participate in re-creating themselves on Film. Beside his originally cinematic intuitions, his unique philosophical reading of—point of departure from—Heidegger in "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary" is a key to understand Malick as both a unique filmmaker and a Cavellian—not a Heideggerian—heir:

For him the extraordinariness of the ordinary has to do with forces in play, beyond the grasp and the reach of ordinary awareness, that constitute our habitual world; it is a constitution he describes as part of his account of the technological, of which what we accept as the ordinary is as it were one consequence; it is thus to be seen as a symptom of what Nietzsche prophesied, or diagnosed, in declaring that for us "the wasteland grows." Whereas for me the uncanniness of the ordinary is epitomized by the possibility or threat of what philosophy has called skepticism, understood (as in my studies of Austin and of the later Wittgenstein I have come to understand it) as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by. (By "the desire of ordinary language to repudiate itself" I mean—doesn't it go without saying? — a desire on the part of speakers of a native or mastered tongue who desire to assert themselves, and despair of it.)<sup>7</sup>

---

7. Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary: Tanner Lectures on Human Values," in *The Tanner Lecture on Human Values, VIII*, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (Cambridge/Salt Lake City, UT: Cambridge University Press/University of Utah Press, 1988), 84.

## Reading Silence

### [excerpt from *Skepticism and Redemption: The Political Enactments of Stanley Cavell*]

LARRY JACKSON

#### 1. Must We Speak Politically?

Stanley Cavell roams across a wide range of fields in his first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?* most obviously those of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics. But nowhere in the book's ten essays does he advance an explicit political theory. Still, this book, published in 1969 and written over the course of the preceding decade, quietly poses persistent political questions, even in essays on such topics as skepticism and *King Lear*, Kierkegaard's *Book on Adler* and Beckett's *Endgame*, atonal music and ordinary language philosophy. Just who is the "we" spoken of in the book's title (we philosophers? we Americans? we human beings?)? Is there any relationship between democratic equality and the philosophical appeal to our everyday language, as described in the book's eponymous essay?<sup>1</sup> Does the account that Cavell offers in his piece on Wittgenstein of practices and behaviors shared across cultures—the "whirl of organism" of our forms of life—suggest a nascent theory of human solidarity?<sup>2</sup> Our freedom in language and the responsibility we bear for meaning, topics of the book's opening essays, raise the question of what we might owe to one another and how we might offer—or withhold—it in our choices of words. Is this the beginning of a theory of justice? The concept of *acknowledgment*, described in the book's final essays as a response to the challenge of skepticism, shifts the

---

1. I mean here both an equality of subject matter—a democracy of attention—and an equality of speakers, so that philosophy becomes, on Cavell's account, timely and accessible, which is to say, relevant to any and all.

2. Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 52.

problem from what I can know to what I might do.<sup>3</sup> Is this a theory of moral or political action (or both)?

Each of the themes that I identify here as political has something to do with what counts for us, with what we value, with “our cares and commitments” and responsibilities to one another.<sup>4</sup> How I make such determinations—how I enact them—determines who I am. If such themes do in fact run through the varied subjects of *Must We Mean What We Say?* it is impossible for me to imagine them being politically neutral, examined, as they were, in a decade of war, in years of struggle over rights demanded and denied—an age in which a nation wrestled with its original sins of expansion and inequality, and the world’s fate rested more on the accuracy of our intelligence than the wisdom of our leaders. When millions demanded that their voices be heard and their humanity acknowledged, how could Cavell write about lending one’s voice to what one says, or of our shared human forms of life, or of the avoidance and the denial of acknowledgment, without meaning it politically?

Must we speak politically? Do philosophers have political obligations, not just as citizens, but *as philosophers*—obligations that must be met in the writings or teachings that constitute their work? If such obligations can be said to exist, does it make silence about the political crises of their time unforgivable? Or are there times when silence is the most appropriate—the only—response?

Cavell addressed these very questions more than 20 years after the publication of *Must We Mean What We Say?* in a reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Fate,” titled “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending.” It was not Cavell’s first foray into Emerson’s writings, nor was it his first reading of “Fate,” but it did represent the first time that Cavell felt, as he puts it, “forced to emphasize a political theme in [Emerson’s] work.”<sup>5</sup> What made the politics so urgent?

Writing in the early 1990s, the burning issue was not the Vietnam War or the American Civil Rights Movement or even the lingering threat of nuclear weapons,

---

3. Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 238-66 (see n. 2), 257.

4. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 312.

5. Cavell, “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending,” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 193.

but the “Heidegger affair”: the scandal over then recent “revelations”—none so startling or so new—concerning Heidegger’s intimate involvement with National Socialism.<sup>6</sup> For critics of Heidegger the cardinal offense was not that the philosopher had been a member of the Nazi Party (though this was bad enough), but rather that he had remained silent—appallingly so—about the mass exterminations carried out in the death camps. Bad choices might be forgiven, but a proud, untroubled conscience discourages such generosity.

For Cavell the question of Heidegger’s politics was a particularly personal one. Emerson, one of Cavell’s foremost intellectual influences, was also one of Heidegger’s philosophical forebears. The American transcendentalist had exerted a major influence on the early Nietzsche, whose ideas became something of an obsession for Heidegger just at the time of his involvement with the Nazi Party. This is bad company for anyone to keep, but it is an especially unfortunate legacy for the founder of American philosophy. “Does Heidegger’s politics—by association, to say the least—taint Emerson’s points of contact with it?” Cavell asks.<sup>7</sup> But given his own place in that lineage and his sedulous efforts to make the institutions of American philosophy recognize Emerson as a serious thinker, this question of contamination must refer as much to Cavell himself as it does to Emerson.

Cavell approaches the question of whether Heidegger’s politics pollute Emerson’s own ideas by interpreting another problematic silence: Emerson’s apparent failure in “Fate,” an essay on human freedom, to criticize the institution of slavery in America.<sup>8</sup> Emerson’s opposition to slavery is well known, but his silence in “Fate” about what was, in his time, the single greatest violation of human freedom has struck critics such as Harold Bloom and John Updike as an admission of despair that

---

6. The publication of Victor Farias’s book *Heidegger et le Nazisme* sparked “the Heidegger Affair.” See Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). For a blow-by-blow account, see Thomas G. Pavel, “The Heidegger Affair,” in *MLN* 103.4 (September 1988): 887-901.

7. Cavell, “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending,” 194.

8. Cavell wrote about “Fate” in 1983, 12 years before “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending.” “I was myself silent about this question of Emerson’s silence when I wrote an essay in 1983 mostly on Emerson’s ‘Fate’ (I called it ‘Emerson, Coleridge, Kant’), my first somewhat extended treatment of an Emersonian text. It was seeming to me so urgent then to see to the claim to Emerson to be a philosophical writer, in principle imaginable as founding philosophy for a nation still finding itself, that I suppose I recurrently hoped that Emerson had, for the moment of the essay ‘Fate’, sufficiently excused or justified his silence in saying there, ‘Nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are.’” *Ibid.*, 194-95.

nothing could be done, “that Emerson gave up on the hope of democracy” altogether.<sup>9</sup> It is not as though Emerson’s silence was absolute: both before and after “Fate” he spoke out publicly—polemically—against slavery. But what Cavell is asking, after Bloom and Updike, is whether this was enough philosophically.<sup>10</sup>

The answer might at first appear to be no. Referring to a public speech that Emerson gave in 1844, titled “Emancipation in the British West Indies,” Cavell argues that “the absoluteness of the American institution of slavery among the forms human self-enslavement takes, hence the absoluteness of *philosophy’s* call to treat it, to recoil from it, is announced.”<sup>11</sup> Implicit in this reading of Emerson are two assumptions: one, that the goal of philosophy is human freedom, so that philosophical thought and writing should take the form of an intellectual confrontation with enslavement or imprisonment or, as Emerson would put it, fate, in all their forms; and two, that such a confrontation must not be polemical. The problem that “Fate” raises, then, is not whether Emerson *the citizen* opposed slavery, voted against it, used his skills as a writer and his reputation as an orator to confront it polemically: this is uncontroversial. The problem is whether Emerson *the philosopher* was able to fulfill the very duty that he had assigned to philosophy itself, that is, whether he treated and recoiled from slavery not just polemically but as a thinker as well. If the meaning of this—a philosophical confrontation with slavery that is *not* polemical—is not yet entirely clear, it is worth dwelling, for now, on just this question: How could an essay about human freedom written just months after the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act—a law that effectively expanded the reach of the slave owner to every state in the Union, extinguishing for the slave the very possibility of freedom within the borders of the United States—fail to address this most bald and brutal affront to human freedom? Did Emerson succumb to a despair that compromised the emancipatory ambition of his own philosophical writing? Did philosophy for Emerson cease to be a confrontation with the world, becoming instead a retreat from its ruthless realities? If Cavell’s essay on “Fate” is as self-referential as I have claimed, then how he answers these questions will, I argue, shed light on the political themes that I have sought in Cavell’s own project.

---

9. *Ibid.*, 194.

10. For this critique of Emerson, see Harold Bloom, “Mr. America,” in *The New York Review of Books*, November 22, 1984. Also John Updike, “Emersonianism,” in *The New Yorker*, June 4, 1984.

11. Cavell, “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending,” 210; emphasis mine.

Cavell's response to the question of Emerson's silence in "Fate," roughly, is this: philosophy cannot but confront slavery. "If slavery is the negation of thought," writes Cavell, "then thinking cannot affirm itself without affirming the end of slavery."<sup>12</sup> Is this just a glib excuse for inaction, a convenient bromide for the morally self-satisfied? I will have more to say about that, but for now I limit myself to only this point. Beyond the question of philosophical influence as it appears in "Emerson's Constitutional Amending," there is another, *historical* inheritance worth considering when reading Cavell, namely, the legacy of that same absolute institution of slavery, which, at the time that Cavell was writing *Must We Mean What We Say?* took the form of Jim Crow segregation. Does it too require an absolute philosophical response?<sup>13</sup> If something like this were not true of the call to philosophy in Cavell's time—and our own—if unjust wars and irrational hatreds were not incentives to think, it would prove, to quote Cavell, "harder than I could digest."<sup>14</sup>

But that is not the only reason I will contend that these are, for Cavell, the most pressing incentives to think. Cavell's writings, early and late, show him struggling with the political provocations of his age in a fashion that I consider both fundamental to his project, and ultimately relevant to political philosophy more generally.<sup>15</sup> The stalking, subtle presence of the problems of post-war *politics* in *Must We Mean What We Say?*—of war and inequality and indifference and the bomb—thus

---

12. *Ibid.*, 205.

13. Cavell *the citizen* certainly responded to Jim Crow segregation, participating, for example, in Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. See Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 429-34.

14. Cavell, "Emerson's Constitutional Amending," 194.

15. Cavell might appear to undercut my argument in his memoir, when he writes: "There came a time during the Vietnam War when *I interrupted myself* during a lecture, moved to say that I could no more ignore that morning's news, at least to notice it in common, than I would be able to withhold attention to the cry of a child. At the same time I registered my sense that this very acknowledgment signaled the *victory of violence over thinking*. Then sometimes thinking must turn to destroy its peace, to observe havoc, in order to attract its own protection" (Cavell, *Excerpts*, 478; emphasis mine). But if philosophy is an argument with one's culture, then such interruptions are no more a suspension of thought than Nora's dramatic exit is a cessation of her argument with Torvald: "[T]he final sound of the slamming door of the house [...] counts not as the interruption of an argument but as its continuation by other means" (Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981, 23-24]). Elsewhere, citing Heidegger, Cavell suggests that our oblivion to such provocations is indeed what calls most for thinking: "[T]he thing most critically provoking in our riskily provocative time [is] that we are still not really provoked, that nothing serious matters to us, or nothing seriously, that our thoughts are unscrupulous, private" (Cavell, "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 141-70 [see n. 7], 144-46).

provides a window into Cavell's key philosophical concepts and an indication of what his theory of the political might be.

## 2. The Interpretation of Politics

Most commentators on Cavell have either avoided political questions altogether or tallied up those few passages in Cavell's writings where he speaks openly (and, so the assumption goes, anomalously) about political topics and issues: the pages on the social contract or on abortion in *The Claim of Reason*; the invocations of democracy in his defense of Perfectionism against Rawls in the Carus Lectures; or his occasional treatment of patently political themes in *The Senses of Walden*. Andrew Norris opens his introduction to a volume on Cavell and political philosophy with an admission that "the very idea that Stanley Cavell's work contributes anything significant to political theory might seem odd," and notes the dearth of writings on the subject.<sup>16</sup> Stephen Mulhall, in a chapter devoted to politics in his book *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, argues that Cavell's writings on politics were, until later in his career, "much less extensive than his work on aesthetics and morality."<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Rhu takes the opposite position in *Stanley Cavell's American Dream*, describing "The Avoidance of Love," the final essay in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, as a work inspired "by the agony of America's involvement in Vietnam," while arguing that Cavell's later writings are less political, more literary, and more palatable.<sup>18</sup> Mulhall and Rhu thus share the premise that a rupture occurs somewhere in Cavell's writings, a break that is at least rhetorical, if not entirely thematic.

In this book I offer a political interpretation of Cavell's work that takes his writings as a cohesive whole dedicated to the discovery and creation of an American voi-

---

16. Andrew Norris, "Introduction: Stanley Cavell and the Claim to Community," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris, 1-18 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 1. Norris writes that only nine of the 214 entries on Cavell in *The Philosopher's Index* concerned the philosopher's contributions to political theory. I have not attempted to replicate Norris's results, not knowing the precise terms of his search. [Note: This chapter was written before Norris's most recent book, *Becoming Who We Are*, was published, so it does not grapple with the ideas advanced there.]

17. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 55. While I think Mulhall underestimates the importance of the political in Cavell's work, his reading has set the tone for those that have followed, including Norris's.

18. Lawrence Rhu *Stanley Cavell's American Dream: Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Hollywood Movies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 25.

ce for both politics and philosophy. While the centrality of America to Cavell's project certainly draws on the history and culture of the United States, most of all on our "sacred" texts—our movies and our literary laments for lost promises (read: *Walden*)—all the world is, once again, for Cavell, America. Which is to say that he understands by this word an idea or a site for humanity rather than any specific geographical location, historical narrative, or political identity. Cavell's concept of American subjectivity will, therefore, be at once a theory of political action and of human redemption: to speak with this American voice is to "stand for humanity."<sup>19</sup> If this idea of America sometimes bears a close resemblance to the history and geography and politics of a place called the United States, it is all the more closely related to a state of immigrancy or exile that millions have found here, a way of being in *no place*, which only means that the idea of America is, for Cavell, the quest for utopia.

My argument thus has bearing on how we interpret the entirety of Cavell's philosophical project and on how we understand his theory of the political. I will pursue three interwoven lines of interpretation, which I call, prosaically enough, the thematic, the aesthetic, and the theoretical.<sup>20</sup> The first of these, the thematic, is the most important and the most controversial [...]. There are three tasks associated with this first line of interpretation:

(1) To describe how we ought to read Cavell by examining four exemplary readings: "The Politics of Interpretation," "Austin at Criticism," "Declining Decline," and "Emerson's Constitutional Amending." In these avowedly political essays spanning his career, Cavell describes his own interpretive strategies, even providing a reading of one of his own earlier essays. From this I develop a loose network of concepts that I use throughout the book as an interpretive key [...].

(2) To identify and analyze the political themes found in Cavell's earliest writings, the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* [...]

---

19. Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 83–109 (see n. 7), 93.

20. Each of these labels is flawed, so I offer them here only as useful signs, not as major landmarks. *Thematic* only accounts for (at best) two of the three tasks I assign to it, failing to describe the work of developing interpretive keys; *aesthetic* is perhaps the best of the three labels, but following on *thematic*, it might suggest that I am analyzing the aesthetics of Cavell's writings rather than a particular aesthetic idea that Cavell employs; and *theoretical* says virtually nothing by saying too much entirely, though it is, perhaps, for its banality, the most accurate.

(3) To show how these themes determine the course of Cavell's philosophical inquiries in the texts that follow them. As I have suggested already, Cavell makes an appeal to everyday political problems in formulating his seminal philosophical concepts and as a way of achieving a theoretical account of what politics is, a strategy analogous to ordinary language philosophy's appeal to what we say in our day-to-day lives as a way of addressing philosophical problems. Having identified these themes I will argue that the creation and discovery of a political and philosophical American voice or subjectivity leads Cavell in two directions: a reading of Thoreau and (later) Emerson, and the study of cinema (which leads, in turn, to a study of opera, a source of inspiration for American movies).<sup>21</sup>

The second line of interpretation, which I call the aesthetic, examines the dramatic genres, plots, and personae (or types) that Cavell associates with politics: the tragic [...], the cinematic [...], the prophetic [...], the operatic or melodramatic, and the comedic [...]. This might be thought of as the book's secondary argument: that Cavell describes politics as staged or enacted, so that our experience as audience members is actually a kind of political education.<sup>22</sup> As he argues in *The World Viewed*, when our lives have become theater, the only intelligible explanation of our condition will itself be dramatic.<sup>23</sup>

My third line of interpretation, the theoretical, is the overarching task of this book [...]: the development of a Cavellian theory of the political. I claim that the central conceptual dynamic in Cavell's thought is the relationship between two poles of human existence: skepticism and redemption. Skepticism is to be understood here as a lived condition rather than a (purely or primarily) intellectual problem. The idea of "living our skepticism" is Cavell's most drastic divergence from other accounts of Cartesian doubt. He criticizes the academic skeptic for reducing an existential state to an epistemological puzzle, as though the quest for certainty were but a clever distraction

---

21. The other reason for turning to opera is the prominence of the voice. It is worth pointing out that Cavell's studies of cinema make almost no mention of movies prior to the advent of "talkies" (a term that appears often, and anachronously, in his writings on film), suggesting that the primary characteristic of cinema as a medium is not the image.

22. See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 91-94.

23. *Ibid.*, 92.

from implacable human anxieties, or a last, desperate attempt to hold on to a receding world. You might as well try to bottle the waning tide. What, then, is skepticism?

Cavellian skepticism is a condition of alienation from the world and from others that takes the form of a crisis of acknowledgment and an avoidance of responsibility. On this reading, the key feature of Descartes' skeptical recital in the *Meditations* is the malaise—or madness—that enables his descent into hyperbolic doubt. The first Meditation depicts the world as a disquieting nightmare. The reliability and familiarity of home give way to the false and fickle stirrings of a malicious demon, rendering its every fact and feature a hostile phantom.

While Cavell views skepticism as a constant human possibility, he also argues that it has distinct historical and political causes and manifestations. And it goes by many names: Coleridge's "dejection," Thoreau's "quiet desperation," Emerson's "secret melancholy," Marx's "estrangement."<sup>24</sup> Dante's dark woods are more important to an account of the experience than anything brooded over in Hume's study. And more important than Dante's woods will be Thoreau's.<sup>25</sup>

Each of these chroniclers of the uncanny describes a world in which things do not add up. Like Descartes', theirs is an account of horror, depicting a senseless, unstable reality, complete with zombies and madmen.<sup>26</sup> But unlike Descartes, they do not restrict this state to the unreliability of the senses or the frivolity of opinion. For them, skepticism persists as a shared mood, a zeitgeist in which objects and people have been miscounted or valued wrongly, so that they are not what they seem to be. Faced with a world that is distant and chaotic, these writers find no place for human

---

24. Cavell frequently links skepticism with mourning as well. See Tammy Clewell, "Cavell and the Endless Mourning of Skepticism," in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9.3 (2004): 75-87. A more problematic formulation of this interpretation of skepticism is Heidegger's "bedimmed averageness," which Cavell also invokes—see, e.g., "The Philosopher in American Life (toward Thoreau and Emerson)," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 33-58 (see note 7), 39. The problem, of course, is that Heidegger uses this phrase in section 27 of *Being and Time*, which is not only one of the most overtly (and uncomfortably) political passages in the book, but is also among the most impoverished philosophical accounts of human plurality that I have encountered. The kind of society that Heidegger condemns in those pages—bustling, messy, disordered—is precisely what I wish to affirm in this work. For more on the politics of this section of *Being and Time*, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

25. Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures After Emerson and Wittgenstein*, 29-76 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 36-37.

26. Madness and all species of the undead (e.g., ghosts and zombies) will be important themes in my discussion of Emerson and Thoreau. Dante's sojourn into hell provides its own share of horrors. Specters and zombie commodities haunt Marx's world.

desires and voices, while those who harbor them are but specters amid the shifting shadows.

Redemption, which is never final or absolute, and remains, therefore, a constant human ambition, requires an enactment of your own existence, recalling the claim to exist that, in Descartes, takes the form of the *cogito*.<sup>27</sup> The difference between Cavell and Descartes—the reason why this is an *enactment of* (rather than a *claim to*) existence—is that redemption must, like skepticism, be lived, which is to say that it concerns what we do, rather than what we know. Cavell thus describes redemption in terms of what he calls *acknowledgment*, a phenomenon that is related to knowledge while also going *beyond* it: to acknowledge my pain is not just to understand it, not to verify it, but to *respond* to it (by alleviating it, for instance).<sup>28</sup> And to acknowledge my pain is to acknowledge me—here, now, this singular being in this specific set of circumstances. And with me, goes my humanity. After all, what is made of stone does not feel pain, which is why some might wish to trade their flesh for it.<sup>29</sup>

Enacting my existence, then, means making a place in the world by petitioning some other to acknowledge my voice and my desire as a human subject.<sup>30</sup> I may use words to issue my demand, or I may show it. My demand may refer to some specific fact in the world or some particular need that I have, or it may be more nebulous. I hope that it proves to be more than mere whimsy, but I cannot know until I have made the attempt: in the scene of acknowledgment my trust in what I have to say or show—my trust in myself—necessarily precedes my knowledge of it.<sup>31</sup> Whatever the circumstances, Cavell argues that I enact my existence in a staged confrontation with someone else. His concept of redemption thus resembles the demand that occupies the place of the *cogito* in Marx: “I am nothing and should be everything,” only, in this iteration the actor is no longer the Proletariat.<sup>32</sup> It is America.

---

27. Cavell, “Being Odd, Getting Even,” 88–90.

28. Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love,” 257.

29. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §283.

30. The secularization of sin or perdition as skepticism is, of course, taken over from Descartes; the secularization of the concept of redemption is due to the unavailability of God, after Descartes, to be my other. Cavell’s secularization of the theological will be an important theme in what follows.

31. The allusion here is to Emerson’s “Self-Reliance.” It occurs throughout Cavell’s writings and this work. See Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 12.

32. Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker 53–65 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 63.

Since skepticism is in fact alienation from the world and from others, redemption through this staged confrontation, the scene of acknowledgment, also takes the form of reconciliation, or what Cavell calls a “return to the ordinary.”<sup>33</sup> This is not necessarily reconciliation with the person I address when issuing my demand: conflicts may not end so easily (or at all). It is, rather, reconciliation with a *world* that, so long as I remained mute, would not exist for me: it is not *my* world until it includes *my* voice. And so, my demand is actually to have my voice heard both in affirming my own existence *and* in “calling back the world.”<sup>34</sup> The connection between these two is Cavell’s Kantian premise that to be is to judge the world. By enacting my existence I enact this judgment. (The voice plays the same role for Cavell that transcendental apperception plays for Kant: the simultaneous presentation of world and self.)

But what does it mean to bring back the world, to return to the ordinary? It is among the most enigmatic, challenging concepts in Cavell’s writings, appropriate enough to the melancholic reveries of Romanticism (“Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long winters ...”), but hard to nail down as a philosophical concept, let alone a political one.<sup>35</sup> This is how I see it. In speaking, I take responsibility for the world. I express my desire for intimacy with it, for the right to judge it, name it, make it my home, as though I were Adam in the Garden. But this is not a return to (or of) things *as they are*: my desire entails “recounting” or revaluing things and people. The world is not only interpreted here: it is changed. Cavell borrows the Emersonian “transfiguration” of Kant’s transcendental philosophy, where the judgment of the world is both the epistemological constitution of it that Kant delineates in the first *Critique*, *and* the expression of (Romantic?) disappointment with this epistemology, expressed as a wish to *change* the world altogether, the dissatisfaction described in Emerson’s “Experience” as knowledge of the contrast between “the world I converse with” and “the world I think”—knowledge that I do not synthesize, but suf-

---

33. Cavell, “Texts of Recovery (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Heidegger ...),” in *Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 53.

34. Cavell, “Opera and the Lease of Voice,” in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 151.

35. William Wordsworth “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 131.

fer.<sup>36</sup> You might describe this as the claim that Kant's transcendental philosophy is not transcendental enough. Democracy is Idealism on these shores, the making of a *new* world. It is as though my desire brings the world back to life, animates what I once took to be unworthy of—or hostile to—it.<sup>37</sup> Another word for it, which will come up throughout Cavell's writings, is rebirth—both my own, and my world's.<sup>38</sup> Rebirth follows the craving for intimacy that is desire.

The claim—implicit in the demand for acknowledgment—that I have a right to voice this new desire for a new world, accounts for the confrontational nature of the scene of acknowledgment, what Cavell calls, “the *argument* of the ordinary.” But it is this voicing that, however contentious, constitutes the essence of human freedom, even when the acknowledgment that you demand is not to be granted. Freedom lies in the assumption of responsibility for the world, for yourself, and for your society, which is why this staged confrontation is the start of, and a necessary component in, what Cavell calls, in his response to Rawls, “the conversation of justice.” How can this be political?

### 3. Skepticism and Redemption

In this book, I treat the lived condition of skepticism, as I have described it here, as an explicitly (though not exclusively) *political* experience. The political relevance of other minds skepticism—the question of whether another person has ideas, feelings, or even a mind as I do—should be obvious. When the harmless suspicions, anxieties, and snobberies of everyday life become so exaggerated, is there any reason *not* to deny others justice or life? To say that we can live our skepticism with regard to other minds is to say that we do not value others as we should, that society, or the world, is now violent and unjust.

---

36. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Brooks Atkinson, 307–26, (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 326. If Romanticism is the desire to overcome our estrangement from the world, as Cavell argues in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, then Marx and Freud clearly belong to that tradition: both bridge the distance between us and the world through a *transformation*—of the world in Marx—of the self in Freud. For Cavell, this is not a disjunctive proposition.

37. Cavell, “Texts of Recovery,” 52–53.

38. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 63–64.

Less obvious is the political significance of material object skepticism, the idea that things may be unknowable or even nonexistent. The politics of material object skepticism rests on the notion that our relationship with things in the world is based on the value they have for us, and that politics is the determination of these values. To say that we can live our skepticism with regard to material objects is to say that we do not value things as we should, and we have turned the world into a vicious, inhuman place as result.

There is ample textual support for this political interpretation of skepticism [...] here are the broad outlines of my reasoning. First, there are suggestions in several of Cavell's writings, most patently in the introduction to *Disowning Knowledge*, that skepticism should be regarded as a historical event with its own unique genealogy, which includes, for instance, the emergence of science and the "death of god" (causes that are not exactly politically insignificant), and most relevant here, *the birth of the idea of politics by consent*.<sup>39</sup> While skepticism is not equivalent to democracy, its reinvention as a modern idea does coincide with the Enlightenment's rediscovery of government by the people. And skepticism is, for Cavell, perhaps all the more likely to assume tragic (which is to say, public) dimensions in a democratic society, a point I discuss at length in my reading of "The Avoidance of Love." This is also one reason why redemption from skepticism is so linked with the idea of America.

Second, in describing skepticism, Cavell uses words that, if not strictly political, are perhaps most common in such contexts (for example, "alienation"), and he quotes accounts from other authors that *are* meant politically (such as Thoreau's "quiet desperation").

Third, and most important, Cavell's account of skepticism in *Must We Mean What We Say?* is itself developed through his discussions of Vietnam, racial inequality, and nuclear holocaust. In treating Cavellian skepticism as a political condition, I am, therefore, bringing the concept home.

My treatment of skepticism turns the redemptive claim to existence as a human subject into a simultaneous demand to have a political voice, which means, ha-

---

39. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 20-21.

ving the *right* to revalue or to recount (things and people in) the world. The goal of Cavellian politics is not *consensus*, but rather an unauthorized *census*, carried out as a scene of confrontation where the goal is mutual acknowledgment. That is, politics for Cavell is a matter of counting, understood both transitively and intransitively. While this concept of census can concern all sorts of matters (What counts as a just war? What counts as equal opportunity? What counts as a marriage?), it is, first and foremost—and implicit in each of these questions—about *who* and *what* counts as political. Do you acknowledge me as a political subject, as one who can determine what counts (as a just war, as equal opportunity, as a marriage...)? Does my demand count for you as political or do you instead dismiss it (as criminal or immoral or puerile or sick)? *Do I count for you?* The claim to and demand for political status, for the right to count, thus accompanies every other political utterance—just as the *cogito* accompanies every physical perception for Descartes, so that I know, despite appearances, my own mind better than I know the sensuous objects around me. I establish and disclose my subjectivity—my voice—as the achievement of political action. The relevant dramatic medium here would be cinema, specifically Cavell's account of Hollywood stars in *The World Viewed*, the star being the one who is disclosed in exemplary cinematic performances with every character, in each line and glance and gesture (Bogart, for instance).<sup>40</sup> Plots and roles remain significant: without them, stars would not be born; not because the stars were hidden from us, just waiting to be revealed, but because they become who they are only in those moments of mass seduction taking place there on the screen right before our eyes. The star is distinct from both actor and character, yet unthinkable without them: Bogart would not be Bogart without that voice, that glare, that impossible blending of intensity and indifference. Nor would Bogart be Bogart without the hard-boiled detectives and disappointed romantics and honorable swindlers that he brings to life. Danish princes would never do. It is the light of these stars refracted through the clichés of underwritten roles and overwrought plots that we as audience gaze at, mesmerized, so that the exemplary cinematic presentation of any world exceeds the sum of its script, projecting another world of fantasy coextensive with it and more singular than any boilerplate narrative could ever be.

---

40. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 27-29.

Every political presentation functions in the same way, disclosing both a demand and the subject issuing it, political subjectivity being, like stardom, distinct from the accidental features of biography and identity associated with the actor. It is why even politics without parties is bound to traffic in endless labels: a name, good or otherwise, is “the immediate jewel” of political utterance. The age-old political practice of name-calling is only the acknowledgment that our political positions make us *who* we are. Any political actor worth his salt knows that much is to be gained by those who filch good reputations by naming their enemies well.

Political census, as Cavell describes it, is by its very nature contentious, an ongoing, interminable argument. Since I am identifying the right to be one who (both transitively and intransitively) counts with our claim to exist as *human* subjects, then denying my place in this combative conversation of justice is a denial of my very humanity. Something like this idea is central to our concept of modern democracy, where rights are not only the possessions of the citizen, but the natural inheritance of every human being. While Cavell argues for this convergence by linking political conversation with human redemption, he does not consider it sufficiently enough, as in his discussion of slavery in *The Claim of Reason*, where slavery is taken to be a perverse acknowledgment of the slave’s humanness, the slave owner being the one who imbrutes *himself*, who denies his own bond with humanity even while denying the slave participation in the conversation of justice.<sup>41</sup> It is not that I oppose Cavell’s reversal of the problem, which is consistent with the sense once captured in our language by the word *brutalize*, though that sense has now perhaps been lost in the endless stream of atrocities to which we have applied it. I do wish, however, to register this general objection. I do not dispute that the sadistic slave owner who tortures or rapes the slave acknowledges *certain* human features, in these cases the ability to suffer the pain and lust that he inflicts upon them. I do not doubt that he even recognizes himself in his victim, at least in these limited ways, and exploits the intimate knowledge that this grants him of a hidden maze of psychic pains and weaknesses. No one ever said sadists and psychopaths were not perceptive or cunning. But then,

---

41. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 372-75. It would seem that this was not always Cavell’s view. In *The World Viewed* Cavell refers to a racist assumption that Scarlett O’Hara makes in *Gone With the Wind* as “dehumanizing.” I will have more to say about this scene in chapter five. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 34.

normal people also talk to horses and describe dogs as their best friends: our hate, like our love, can transgress the boundaries between species.

This point may be an obvious one: it has become a treacherous cliché to speak of the dehumanizing of our enemies and our poor and our oppressed, as it has, conversely, become a sanctimonious cliché to remind others that the Russians (or whoever has replaced them as our foe) love their children as much as we do, as though *that* fact will be enough to make us toss away our guns once and for all. No, Cavell is right to say that there is a terrifying fact that we must all own up to in being human, namely that there is no limit to the horrors we are willing to inflict on other people. If only every day were Christmas, when, as an endless number of battlefield legends have it, the trenches fell silent while enemy armies that had been killing one another just a few hours earlier serenaded each other with carols across no man's land—only to replace the sound of song with the noise of bullets the next day. There is no end to the ways in which we deny others their voices; no end either to our means of imbruing ourselves. But does our altered sense of the word *brutalization*—our sense that it is now our victims who come out as something less than human in our assessments—offer a thread worth following?

Just look at the photos of the mangled bodies of children who have worked in mines or the sinewy scars on the backs of slaves and you cannot help but feel that this sentiment of pillaged, broken humanity, commonplace though it may be, is somehow correct. What Cavell adds to this cliché, though he fails to realize its implications in full, is a way to think through the power this sentiment has over us, along with our blindness to the ways in which we go on denying the humanity of others by ending or ignoring the conversation. Child labor and slavery are now too painful for our consciences to endure, but our deafness to countless others is not (yet).<sup>42</sup>

While participation in the conversation of justice thus occurs on two levels simultaneously—the human and the political—this convergence ceases to be, in my reading of Cavell, that of “man” and “citizen.” The immigrant or exile, Cavell's words for the political subject, now displaces the citizen. But if skepticism means not being at home in the world, why should the immigrant or the exile be the redemptive political

---

42. I write this knowing that the “we” that I identify here is not as large a portion of humanity as I might like.

subject rather than the very symbol of our estrangement? The answer is that our (American) settling into the world, as dramatized in Thoreau's project at Walden and captured in Emerson's idea of "abandonment," consists of "being on the road, on the way."<sup>43</sup> It is as though America's presence a world away from Europe made it, for Thoreau and Emerson, a place where stifling paradox became fruitful irony. I have said already that in Cavell's reading of them we *return* to the world through its revaluation, which is to say, its creation, its discovery as *new*. I will add now to this irony our achievement of intimacy through exile, and our redemption from alienation by becoming immigrants—immigrancy being Cavell's Emersonian "transfiguration" of our skeptical homelessness.<sup>44</sup> The idea is clear enough as a reading of, say, Emerson's essay "Circles," where abandonment is taken as the human condition, the fact that "around every circle another can be drawn," so that the range of human experience is "god in nature [...] a weed by the wall."<sup>45</sup> Which is to say that we possess all the power and severity of the wild and of the divine: no walls can contain us, just as no borders can contain the immigrant or the exile. To accept limitation—the only sin, according to this defrocked preacher—is to deny our desire for the world, and thus to deny our humanness. But what could any of this mean politically?

I have said that having a home in the world means *making* a home, and making a home in a strange or foreign place is exactly what the immigrant or exile must do. Specifically, in politics the redemptive status of immigrancy or exile derives from the fact that political confrontation occurs, according to Cavell's inflection of utopia, in *no place*—as in "no place *else*," as in, *here* ... or anywhere.<sup>46</sup> There is no proper setting for political exchange, so my staging of a demand is itself the creation of a political space, not according to some fixed idea, but as the creation and discovery of political action itself: my demand is not just raising a new issue, but inventing a new idea of—a new medium for—politics. The emancipation in the last two centuries of private life, of the worlds of labor and love, represents not just new causes and new laws, but the creation of new sites for the staging of acknowledgment. I do not refer here to the expansion of the established political realm, the absorption of private life by the pu-

---

43. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 29-30.

44. Cavell, "Emerson's Constitutional Amending," 211.

45. Emerson, "Circles," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Essential Writings*, 252-62 (see n. 40), 255.

46. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 20.

blic sphere, though this has clearly happened as well. I mean instead that what had been understood as the proper space of politics turned out to have no monopoly on acknowledgment, while in the dark, constricted recesses where, for centuries, people had toiled invisibly, content to be acknowledged only in the next world, human beings were reborn, demanding that the next world coincide with this one. In politics, at least, existence precedes essence.

Skepticism in its political form includes the sense that political action is impossible, and impossible because we do not know what it is or where to begin; we do not know how to offer our consent (or not). It is as though the terms of the social contract have been reversed, so that we live in a pre-political state of nature precisely because our society is so well ordered that it can get along just fine without our voices. But without my consent it is not a contract at all: it is a skeptics' conspiracy.<sup>47</sup> As a political subject I thus feel compelled to stage my enactment of existence *outside* of all conventions, what Cavell names the order of law, either because I think this order is hopelessly compromised by injustice, or when this is not the case, because the order of law is only truly just—i.e., I only actively consent to it—when it is animated by my (human) desires. I become an immigrant or exile, convinced that a home for my desire must be made elsewhere, in a new world, a world that will be found and founded right here. In other words, consent is possible only by way of voicing my dissent, what Cavell calls, after Emerson, aversion. It means settling into my home, my society, by going into exile, by being on the road.

Being outside the order of law means that I risk unintelligibility, that I suffer accusations of childishness, madness, illness, perversity, criminality, or worse. I have no authority, no appeal, no claim to standing beyond a voice or the silent staging of my desire and my humanity. I may not even have an obvious grievance or injury that I can point to. Yet I feel wronged and wish to establish a new standard, surpassing that of my society, for measuring human justice. Risking unintelligibility in this realm of desire does not mean that I have given up on making myself understood—the despair that Bloom and Updike accuse Emerson of, or what Cavell will describe, after Wittgenstein, as the “fantasy” of a private language. On the contrary, I refuse despair by persisting in my attempt to achieve intelligibility outside of the available condi-

---

47. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 469-70.

ons for political conversation, driven by the feeling that action and intelligibility are impossible within the order of law; not because the words I use are inadequate, but because my words and my life are now misaligned.<sup>48</sup> My words continue to mean: *I do not*. According to the order of law I am, as an exile, *no one*, which is precisely why I can speak for all, why, at that moment, “I stand for humanity.”<sup>49</sup> What I called Marx’s cogito becomes this for Cavell: I am no one, and I speak as everyone.

The best example of the Cavellian political subject is Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll House*.<sup>50</sup> Of course, Nora leaves her husband Torvald, who can hear her only as a child, a hysteric who needs to be calmed, rather than a fully realized human being expressing a desire for change. The order of law she inhabits is compromised, and so she too is compromised, unable to be reborn within its confines, represented in this case as the house she inhabits, the house referred to in the play’s title. She stages her desire by leaving it, by slamming the door behind her, an unspoken utterance that is the enactment of her existence. However loud that slamming door must sound to Torvald and to us as her audience, it is a silent show of desire that we must read. But must politics always entail slamming doors and other literal abandonments?

Above I said that it is not only when the order of law is hopelessly compromised by injustice that such enactments occur, that they are, on the contrary, ways of revitalizing the conversation of justice and showing that I consent to my society. My final chapter, which explores Cavell’s engagement with Rawls in *The Claim of Reason* and the Carus Lectures, considers how such enactments, as forms of dissent, can contribute to the conversation of justice in societies that have, as Cavell calls it, “good enough justice,” so that, while I stage my demand outside the order of law, I am not compelled to slam the door on it, to walk out on it altogether. In such a society, argument and confrontation make possible the conversation of justice by redirecting it away from the impersonal rules and political operations that have no need for my voice to scenes of mutual acknowledgment where the possibilities of language to recount the world are explored and contested. In such circumstances, dissent is not the mark of a society’s failures, but a measure of consent to its mode of justice.

---

48. James Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?,” in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming et al (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 242-83.

49. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 5.

50. My references to this play are all drawn from Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll House*, in *Ibsen: Four Major Plays, Volume I*, trans. Rolf Fjelde (New York: Signet Classics, 2006).

The argument I have delineated here largely begins [...] with the dynamic of skepticism and redemption in relation to the three political issues I find in *Must We Mean What We Say?*: the threat of nuclear holocaust, the continued injustice of racial inequality, and the destructive madness of the war in Vietnam. Each of these issues is part of a larger claim that America is *no place*, in the dual sense of not existing and of being a utopia, the site of human redemption. Dramatically, Cavell's claim is that ours is a state of tragedy, our fate as a nation like that of Lear. Philosophically, Cavell shows that we cannot know in advance what counts as political, that political action and intelligibility are subjects of constant contestation [...].

I claim that Cavell seeks an alternative to this American tragic narrative in cinema and in Thoreau's *Walden*, a book written in response to the same political crisis of a nation tearing itself apart by expanding its powers and by failing to acknowledge a sizable segment of its population, which is to say, by failing to count properly. The important themes to emerge here are those of recounting or revaluing the world, and of our society as a parody of the social contract, what I have already referred to as a skeptics' conspiracy. Thoreau's prophetic persona, the dramatic mask or type that Cavell finds in *Walden* as an alternative to tragedy, also sets the stage for the remainder of my argument, where prophetic politics becomes what Cavell calls "passionate utterance," corresponding to the dramatic narratives of opera and melodrama [...].<sup>51</sup>

I show how passionate utterance figures in Cavell's engagement with Rawls, so that dissent forms the basis for a continued conversation of justice in the form of the interminable argument I have described. This drama of consent, as Cavell calls it, is a narrative of forgiveness corresponding to comedy in two ways. First, it is the drama of a society in which citizens can exercise their dissent freely, can show their aversion openly, as do all the quirky, amorous pairs that populate romantic comedies, or as the Marx Brothers do in their ecstatic eccentricities. These pairings and partnerships repudiate society's conspiracies by offering a model of genuine consent, while at the same time testing society's tolerance for aversive dissent (which is why so many romantic comedies feature brushes with the law, to say nothing of the Marx Brothers'

---

51. Cavell suggests that his notion of passionate utterance is the most politically relevant idea in his work, though what little explanation he gives differs from my own account. See Cavell, "The Incessance and the Absence of the Political," in *The Claim to Community* (see n. 17), 263-318.

own adventures in that arena). Second, it is comedy that best shows us a world that refuses to conform to our ideas, a world as hostile to us as anything dreamt of in Descartes' first Meditation or Marx's haunted world in which commodities stalk us like zombies and "all that is solid melts into the air." It is in the comedian's world that every step is a pratfall, that every seat has a tack on it, and that our own bodies conspire against us—a rumbling stomach at the lothario's moment of seduction or our limbs becoming the tangled, heavy chains of that clumsy condition we call being human. Comedy is the knowledge, as hard as it is happy, that being human means being humbled. We all share in this knowledge because, living our skepticism, we experience a world pitched against us, mocking our presumptions of power and relishing our vulnerabilities. But the comic alone finds grace in such moments, showing us that the world is not to be recovered rapaciously, as in tragedy, but accepted in its risible unwieldiness, what Emerson calls its "lubricity." It is comedy, therefore, which teaches us to forgive the world for its rebuke of us, where forgiveness is not accommodation or resignation to the humiliations of being alive, but a refusal of despair in the face of them. Grief may make idealists of us all, as Emerson writes, but it is despair that will deflate our every ideal, which is why Emerson called on the American Scholar not to instruct, but to cheer us, and to cheer us not that we may escape from the ugly realities of the world, but that we may go on suffering them, confident that we may at last find the genius to match them, and in the end, claim some small victory for justice.<sup>52</sup>

---

52. Emerson, "Experience," 309.

# End Times According to Stanley Cavell

## [a review essay of Larry Jackson's *Skepticism and Redemption: The Political Enactments of Stanley Cavell*]

AMIR KHAN

Unintelligibility. Madness. Death. These are strange and ominous words to lead any essay, but the words themselves are not so strange to philosophy, and certainly not to anyone with an ear for Stanley Cavell's voice. Then certainly philosophy uses them in a strange way, or, say, in unconventional ways. To assume these words mean what they "ordinarily" do (when reading Cavell) is to put on a presumption of drama that is not only uncalled for, but romantically irritating. When Cavell says unintelligibility, he doesn't *really mean* unintelligible; when he says madness, he cannot possibly mean *madness*; and when he says death, he cannot possibly mean *death*. So what is with philosophy's or Cavell's insistence on using these words outside of their ordinary habitat, particularly when Cavell is so obviously sympathetic to the Wittgensteinian plea to bring language back from holiday?

Does Cavell wish to add extraordinary supplements to words like unintelligibility, madness, and death, or does he wish for us to read and understand these words in precisely their ordinary and natural setting? If the latter, how can this be?

Put as bluntly and non-romantically as possible: *no one* would risk unintelligibility (i.e., *actually* speaking in tongues) for the sake of philosophy. No one would risk madness or *losing one's grip on reality* for philosophy. No one would risk death, or physical extinction, to do philosophy. In their ordinary contexts, these are very bad things indeed, so why should philosophy, in explicitly seeking to avoid charges of romanticism, insist on such macabre terms in the first place? But surely a title with the word redemption in it cannot help but echo romantic sentiment. But does Jackson

(via Cavell) provide too much or too little? In the end, that is, is Cavell's philosophy hopeful or baleful? I can only offer the following: on my reading, upon my understanding of Jackson's masterful take on the words and work of Stanley Cavell, one comes away feeling that Cavell *holds out* on the promise of philosophy, which means that in the present, to do philosophy like Cavell, or to see the world as he sees it *is to commit to a dark vision indeed*. Jackson renders Cavell's work thus: the world is *bad*, in bad shape, and in no way ready for philosophy—which is a strange, unnatural, and extraordinary rendering of “redemption” as well.

Reader, let me be clear: Larry Jackson's *Skepticism and Redemption* is a *tour de force*. Despite its remarkable ability to provide suitable signposts for us to make our way through the vast (and truly, I mean vast) expanse of Cavell's thought and thinking, Jackson's book leaves no room, as far as I can tell, for any type of emancipatory politics, or politics of solidarity—the hope for which is the driving engine of the piece, particularly for those (like myself) who have managed to internalize disparate realms of Cavell's thought disparately. Put another way: this book is for those who have compartmentalized Cavell's thinking (on film, on ordinary language, on Shakespeare), who have avoided “manipular” attempts to give meaning and cohesion to Cavell's thought as though to do so would be to “enact” some sort of philosophical enterprise out of Cavellian spirit. But the promise of a Cavellian politics is tantalizing, and Jackson's book reads in the manner of a philosophical caper. He takes us to the end and we are forced to follow along precisely because his title promises a politics.

Which leads to two principal ironies of the book. The first is that it cites Emerson: “But I have not found that much was gained by manipular attempts to realize the world of thought” (47), which is to say that not much is to be gained by systematizing, ontologizing, or methodologizing the world we think, as opposed to the world we inhabit. *Yet this book is just such a manipular attempt aimed at the world that Cavell thinks*. Part of the reason I found myself so engrossed by Jackson's essay, I think, is because it does something I had long resisted doing, something I think Cavell's work specifically uncalls for, i.e., the manipular attempt at constructing a cohesive, unified Cavellian ontology (specifically, a *political* one). The hope of a unified Cavellian politics, and the belief that such a thing *could be* achieved forced me to draw down

some of the defences I had unknowingly put up. Make no mistake: Jackson's book, like most of Cavell's work, is so skillfully executed that one could easily (mis)construe it as dangerous, even diabolical.

If we are aware of the first irony as we read Jackson's essay, the second is apparent in hindsight only. The book itself (to which I am doing considerable disservice in fleshing out this "spoiler"), in the end, does not leave us with a politics in hand but still begging for a politics, despite its well-earned exhortation that we may not have, as of yet, earned the right to do politics at all—because even if I, or you, dear reader, have internalized the political thinking of "everyday" and "ordinary" redemptions necessary to truly enact a stance of "skepticism," it is frightfully apparent that no one else has. Part of the revolutionary potential of Cavell's writings comes in the waiting (patience, and patience) for others to come around. The Cavellian lesson brought to bear by Jackson is that if this world is not ready to own up to its own words—if this world continues, that is, to swallow the words of others in order not to see its own vulnerabilities—then the best we can accomplish as a political act is not even the direct calling out of such stances of cowardice, but the indirect expression of our own inner transformation and recognition of our countrymen's hollow thoughts and speech.

If responsibility is the definitive feature of freedom [...] then we are not free until we have set aside childish words, or rather, ceased to let words speak for us, as though they were our parents. Yes, they were here before us and we do inherit them: so too must we claim them [...]. The epic [*Walden*] Thoreau writes is a war over words: words he must capture by living what they mean. Only then is he responsible for what he says, only then is he free. Until the nation can speak in this way it is not free either. "In religion and politics, literalism is defeated because we allow our choices to be made for us," writes Cavell. He adds, "in politics we allow ourselves to say, e.g., that a man is a fugitive who is merely running from enslavement. That is an attempted choice of meaning, not an autonomous choice of words." [...] What does it mean, then, to say [...] that politics requires the renunciation of our cannibalism? It means no longer swallowing the words of others. (214-215)

What the nation acts, in its understanding of fugitives and slaves, is not, at least not necessarily, the world I think. To claim one's language is to have the courage to think for oneself. It may be obvious enough nowadays that a slave running from enslavement is not a fugitive. But what exactly is a fugitive today? Is an immigrant a fugitive? What makes an immigrant illegal?

But these are heady questions. And while Cavell in Jackson's hands is deeply troubled by America's sins (slavery and Vietnam), I don't think Jackson ever promised heady answers to be articulated elsewhere (say, in our legislatures or at executive board meetings). What Jackson did promise, or what we are at the very least tempted with, is the possibility that our ordinary and everyday transcendences of injustice might result in some version of collective emancipatory politics not as yet-to-be or elsewhere, but *here*, now, in the present: a present politics of individual, everyday, ordinary redemptions somehow *collectivized* and carrying, of course, a bona fide Cavellian stamp of approval.

Cavell's entire philosophical project thus begins as the removal of the tragic curses of war and racism that plagued America in the 1960s ... "We have, as tragic figures do, to go back to beginnings," writes Cavell, "either to un-do or to be undone, or to do again the thing which has caused tragedy, as though at some point in the past history is stuck, and time marks time there waiting to be released." It is the task of releasing the time, of setting it right by undoing America's curses, that leads Cavell [...] to Thoreau's *Walden*, a book also written in response to an imperialist war (in Mexico) and the evils of racism (as slavery); a book also dedicated to claiming a new existence for America. (163)

Perhaps America's tragedy, its inability to address the curses which have plagued its existence, has been collectivized. Indeed, Jackson's discussion on what constitutes "public" as opposed to "private" tragedy is entirely useful: modern politics became "tragic" the moment the idea of political "consent" moved away from the church or state into the realm of (secular) politics. The citizen can no longer take for granted manipular ontologies ratified by either the church or state as constituting *the real*. What instead marks the real is our own voicing of consent; our *consent-to-be-offered*,

sincerely, genuinely, is now the only authentic political act. In a sense, the modern “performance” of political consent means not that we must shun masks but learn to embrace the mask proper to us. We must decide which religion suits us, which government suits us and in so doing, we are *guaranteed* to face disappointment because we will never find the “true” religion (true to me, or to us), nor will we ever find the “true” government (true to me, or to us) in the world we inhabit. In the end we do not really express consent at all, but dis-consent—i.e., our dissatisfaction with words and the world as they stand. Paradoxically, only by so doing are we expressing any sort of meaningful consent of any kind (which is, at the very least, a desire to be heard), albeit one that *cannot* be ratified by the state apparatus at all, which, of course, begs the question: “Why go on repeating yourself if what you say goes unheeded?” (241)

If our lives do in fact rest on theater nowadays, as Cavell claims in his reading of *Hamlet*, then redemption will not mean the end of acting, the but the end of tired roles and worn out scripts. It will mean, therefore, “to act without performing.” And if theatricality is akin to the fantasy of a private language, in which I have perfect control over what I express, then presentness means abandoning “the wish for total intelligibility.” It means assuming the risk of becoming unintelligible in entering the visible, audible [i.e. public] world I share with others; presentness is “the capacity to exist for others, to acknowledge and accept the limitedness of others’ views of oneself.” When I am as yet unknown and thus unintelligible to others, all I can do is enact my existence once more. (153)

The steps are tricky. First, one must decry or denounce any public ratification of one’s words and world. Second, one must be willing to “wage war” with one’s (own) words in order to examine what they really mean for society and for oneself. Third, one must not then renounce words altogether as inadequate, but find ways and steps to ratify one’s disappointment with them *publicly*, which may be to offer a rebuke, or may be, indeed, to offer one’s rebuke in silence as though by refusing to take up and use words so cavalierly, one is holding out on the promise of words, or, at the very le-

ast, the hopes for emancipation and justice that seem to derive from the fact that we, as human beings, are creatures fated to use words to express our desires.

So the true political question becomes not, “How do we achieve perfect justice?” or, “Are we on our way to achieving perfect justice?”, but rather, “Is the justice we have *now* good enough?” And if it is not, we do not move *forward* couched cozily within some prearranged teleological unfolding that guarantees some future emancipation (the standard understanding of “redemption”)—in a sense, prescribing the way forward (championing what are, in effect, tired old oppressions, whether of “freedom,” “justice,” “equality,” or more degrees of it) but precisely *backwards*, to break down the ways in which we use and understand these phrases in the first place as if in our counterfeit understanding of these words lies the true source of unfreedom, injustice, and inequality.

The desire or need for spiritual self-examination requires retiring, for some measure of time at least, from the human community of shared language. True political consent can only be formed when one is given time and space to contemplate one’s own allegiance to the world and words which one finds oneself in by matter of sheer contingency. The withdrawal from society, the withdrawal of consent, the desire not to speak, however temporary, are all essential in ensuring one has a public voice at all.

[Cavell’s] concept of redemption thus resembles the demand that occupies the place of the cogito in Marx: “I am nothing and should be everything,” only, in this iteration the actor is no longer the Proletariat. It is America. (15)

Later, Jackson adds:

Being outside the order of law means that I risk unintelligibility, that I suffer accusations of childishness, madness, illness, criminality, or worse. I have no authority, no appeal, no claim to standing beyond a voice or the silent staging of my desire and my humanity [...]. I feel wronged [or, perhaps, feel others to have been wronged] and wish to establish a new standard, surpassing that of my society, for measuring human justice. Risking unintelligibility in this realm

does not mean that I have given up on making myself understood [...]. On the contrary, I refuse despair by persisting in my attempt to achieve intelligibility outside of the available conditions for political conversation, driven by the feeling that action and intelligibility are impossible within the order of law ... I am, as an exile, *no one*, which is precisely why I can speak for all, why, at that moment, "I stand for humanity." What I called Marx's cogito becomes this for Cavell: I am no one, and I speak as everyone. (25-26)

Jackson has not the proletariat as nothing, but America. America is in exile, is an immigrant, stemming from its original desire to break away from the community of European nations to found its own Republic. By virtue of claiming its independence in 1776, America took on a massive political risk of unintelligibility; it started from nothing in order to one day speak for everyone from a position of perfect justice.

But clearly Americans don't think this way. Americans think: I am everything and should be. If the goal of philosophy is to get America to consider herself as nothing, in order to be everything (say, a philosophical beacon on the hill), or to speak not for everyone, but, at the very least, for its citizens (if its citizens, that is, demand that America is or become some version of the good city, of Plato's imagined Republic), absolutely no one in America will follow this train of thought, and Cavell's political project, like Thoreau's, is destined to fail (though perhaps protected and preserved by a small coterie of dedicated souls willing to defer, for many more lifetimes to be sure, the conditions necessary for Cavell's words, and Thoreau's for that matter, to be taken up again in future). Thoreau wanted his countrymen to face the founding injustices which created slavery and war, denying at least part of the promise of America which serves to paper over its atrocities. One-hundred and twenty-four years later, Cavell wants his countrymen to do the same, in regards to racism (Civil Rights) and war (in Vietnam). But America will continue to deny its sages and forgo opportunities for redress. Now, a full generation and a half after Cavell's writings in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, America faces many more setbacks, including Ferguson, MO, and multiple Vietnams (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria). Indeed, Cavell can no longer be construed as providing a warning because the warning has come before, unheard then and unheard now. Too late. History is stuck. So what indeed is he doing?

In the years that Cavell was writing *Must We Mean What We Say?* Moses appeared in America perhaps a dozen times; and a dozen times an assassin lurked in the shadows. Rather than hearing its prophets, then, and repenting, America refused its mortality altogether, aspired to godlike “awe-inspiring” power, and a kingdom, indivisible, where no angel was fallen. (138)

Jackson’s treatment of Cavell is a philosophical enactment not so much of politics, but of love, of self-preservation, and of preserving the other’s voice, in particular, the other’s voiced desire as *matter*, hence preserving one’s own voice and ensuring that it, however lost on the multitudes (and to the present moment), still matters also. There is no reason our desires should ever mesh with so-called “political” (i.e., legislative) reality. The collective existence of separate individuals is precisely the idealized form of the good city, i.e., of life in the democratic polis. Collective emancipation is not the goal; rather, it is the emancipation of individuals on a mass scale (one by individual one)—which, in the end, could only be a romantic project, a philosophy suited to spiritual giants, a happy few, and certainly *not* to the masses. Indeed, no mass redemption is possible, which is another way to say that Cavell’s political philosophy, rendered exquisitely here by Jackson, leaves no room for emancipatory politics. *The only thing we can share in solidarity is isolation.* It is a politics where the hope for redress, redemption, and justice is exclusively spiritual, incapable of making the leap to the material. It is a philosophy designed not to empower the masses but the individual, placing its hopes in the utopian unlikelihood that a good city full of citizens whose words have been thoroughly self-examined are not the ones who *ought* to rule over others (as in Plato’s *Republic*), but ought to populate the city *in its entirety*.

In order to be an individual and own one’s words, one must face up to one’s separateness. Yet it does not follow, or has yet to be established for me convincingly, that claiming one’s individuality will, of some political necessity, lead to some type of collective emancipation. But then what have we reduced our collective politics to?—brainless masses following dear Leader? Certainly, whatever politics is, emancipation is key, so the real political question is whether one can have a politics of individual emancipation (good enough justice, moving backwards) *and* collective emancipation

(not perfect justice, but something like solidarity, which is the continual communal striving towards justice (we can move forward together; we can only move backwards *alone*)), or if the two remain mutually exclusive, the demarcation of each from the other routinely buttressed not via the existence of libertarian fascists on the one side and totalitarian communists on the other but by the existence of parliamentary democracies which banally promise to take the best from each, compromising both. In Jackson's assessment, Cavell's politics makes a case for occupying this space of convalescence and "forbearance" guaranteed by parliamentary democracies. It is not a challenge of the status quo, but the responsible philosophical survival of its disappointments that is enacted.

Moreover, to hold out on the promise of philosophy is *not* to be hopeful about the future, which would amount to a romantically trite and exhausted understanding of redemption. Rather, one must face philosophy's continual impotence. We are not to mobilize our political disappointment and make further demands for justice in the world. Rather, we are demanding of ourselves the fortitude and courage to keep holding out on the promise of philosophy, of our words to transform not the outer world of injustice, but the inner world of thought. By so doing, we have conceded a) that we are powerless to change the material conditions of injustice all around us and b) that such acknowledgment is the only form of political redemption or victory philosophy has the business of cultivating. Not demanding that the world change, but demanding that we ourselves change to accommodate a world with such suffering in it with absolutely zero likelihood that the masses will regard such "acts" as redemptive in any way (what we are describing, in fact, are not "acts," but thoughts, which *some* may regard as the only true acts, but certainly not the majority—hence the risk of being unintelligible, of seeming childish).

So if waging a war on words is first and foremost to wage a war against oneself, why oughtn't we to do it? What is there to lose? Certainly we may lose standing, influence, authority and these are significant traumas, but are, in the end, superficial. If a moral life requires that such a war be waged, what stops even those of us who desire a world with justice and redress in it from moving forward (technically, I should say "backward") *in thought*? What prevents the activists of the world, for example, from putting down the picket signs to instead retire to Walden pond?

[T]he promise of rebirth or redemption that the phrase may equally convey—the difference between “wanting this world to stop itself, and wanting all world to end” ... is a difference as infinitesimal as that between comedy and tragedy: just a half step apart; for redemption “presents itself as the dying of the self and hence the ending of the world.” This is why we are so reluctant when faced with the promise of change to endure its trials; why even our suffering is so difficult to give up: “But if I change, I am no longer intact; I die to my world. I would rather die.” Making matters worse is the fact that we are rarely able to discern whether we have indeed found a new beginning or whether we are only in fact at an end, one reason why Hamlet casts such a long shadow over ... Cavell. It is the grim, unspoken question that darkens his words. (160-161)

The question (To be, or not to be?), of course, concerns suicide for the *individual*; for we are talking about not the victory of the sage who manages to get through to the polis, but the one unable to do so, who remains, for a lifetime, unintelligible and exiled from others, perhaps even to him/herself. The half-step between comedy and tragedy is the same half-step between insanity and wisdom and there is no good reason—if one undertakes to visit first principles and wage war against oneself and one’s own words—that one will come out victorious. Put another way: if the project of individual emancipation can only occur one by individual one, how many deaths *without redemption* are we willing to risk or tolerate to build the good city? How many are we prepared to send to the nuthouse? More pressingly, how many are we prepared to send not simply to metaphysical extinction, but to physical extinction as well? The promise of parliamentary democracies surely is that we can avoid such needless metaphysical suffering by recycling our disappointments back into the apparatus of state—which means the only victories which count in a democracy are legislative ones—certainly not spiritual ones. Martin Luther King Jr. did not demand his followers retire to Walden pond; he had them march on Washington and surely we would rather see our sons and daughters die marching on Washington than die for philosophy.

Which is why I insist that this book, however well-intentioned, leaves us stranded, in a place akin not to Plato’s *Republic*, but Dante’s *Inferno*. The manipular attempt to then pull us out of the ninth circle via the political enactments of Cavellian

skepticism is unconvincing. Jackson ends his essay on this note of optimism via Whitman:

In scenes of confrontation and acknowledgment [between individuals, of course, not collectives], we join the conversation of justice, clamorous “multitudes” enacting their own existence and also the existence of America each time. “Through me many long dumb voices, / Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves / Voices of the diseas’d and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs” Cavell hears America singing. (283)

Jackson brings us to the end to be sure, but, perhaps like Hamlet, I do not see a new beginning on the horizon. We have reached the end and nothing in Cavell’s philosophy suggests that our humanity will follow; far more likely our *viciousness*. Unintelligibility, madness, death—these are hardly terms with redemptive currency; add to these “isolation” and “separateness,” and where are we? The above noted optimism is clichéd. I hear more resoundingly Jackson’s words concluding his second chapter, which perhaps unknowingly leaves the dark vision of Stanley Cavell breached:

It may be that the risk in this way of thinking is that you settle for learning only forbearance, for transforming yourself alone. But then it must still be considered how such transformations *can* give birth to new *worlds* (“You are different, what you recognize as problems are different, *your world is different*”: one hopes this is not just a solipsistic delusion) [...]. I claimed that learning how to suffer the world as it is is a necessary condition for changing it [...] as if desire and true needs are born of suffering the world’s separation. Cavell’s reading of indirectness in Emerson and Wittgenstein understands them as teaching us to learn suffering (“patience and patience”), where despair is the most daunting obstacle in our way, and change requires reconciliation with a world of disappointments, the world we converse with. The paragraph from “Experience” that counsels patience and speaks of the futility of manipular attempts to realize new worlds, the final paragraph of the essay, concludes:

Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart?—it seems to say—there is victory yet for all justice: and the true *romance* which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power.

The idea is the bickering sibling of that other great German Idealist of Emerson's time who writes of "that genius which pushes material force to political power." The difference between them is an Emersonian poetics of weakness: the painful knowledge that the revolution is not before us, but always behind us, lost and forgotten, its ambitions in tatters; that change cannot be won at all costs; that you must go on in spite of your failures, because in an imperfect world justice demands of you the discipline, the courage, to fall forever short of its ideal. This is what it means for us to reconcile ourselves to the world's separateness and to allow our interests to be transformed by it—a romance as fraught and profound as any that Hollywood has ever produced. (48-50)

Forbearance must be faced alone. Marx is defeated by Emerson before the so-called political disappointments of twentieth century. Genius is divorced from material and political power. To reconcile ourselves to the world's separateness is precisely to give up on collective emancipation and the goal of the Republic is not to liberate the masses, but to build a city that is good enough to allow us to *bear witness* to our own philosophical and political ineptitude. That is perhaps a vision of redemption, even an accurate Cavellian vision of redemption. But such enactments of skepticism and separateness are not only a deep compromise with justice, but with politics and collective solidarity altogether. We remain in Hamlet's shadow, in patient forbearance. Can we rest there?

## Sore Feet in the City of Light

LAWRENCE RHU

*for Karen*

Is this some bairro of Parnassus  
That names street after street after poets  
Or just a flight from where we live?  
The airport's a quick Metro ride away  
From Rua Fernando Pessoa,  
But my fasciitis prompts no song  
On cobblestones where two cops clamp  
Denver boots on two parked cars.

We met at the school bike rack down yonder  
Where nine streets invoke the Muses  
In New Orleans and Clio's debate  
With Melpomene and Calliope—  
Epic and tragic history—  
Still rages. General Lee's lost his place  
On top of the column at Lee Circle  
Where we shared such distances  
As Tucson and Lake Wobegon,  
Mater Dolorosa and Our Lady  
Of Perpetual Responsibility,  
And found our way from job to job,  
To children and family trips out West.  
Memory's daughters are keeping

Their titles down at the river bend.

The last time we drove through Denver  
Tim hosted us outside at Vincenzo's.  
His kids both played Frisbee with ours  
And, before we pressed on to Boulder,  
Our pair became their slightly older  
Idea of kindness, according to Tim.

On the drive back through Denver we dined  
At a sidewalk café in LoDo  
And watched a guy on a penny farthing  
Pedal by in a dress—one of many  
That evening on bikes in drag for Men-  
Can-Wear-Dresses-Too Day. I'd never  
Seen women's outfits like those guys'  
Since Doolen Junior High's prom,  
I recall, on Rua Fernando Pessoa  
Where one often wonders, Who am I?  
And why?

                    Ten years before, in our new  
Preowned minivan, our kids were upset.  
They missed the fireworks back home  
As we pressed on through Oklahoma  
Due west to Shamrock, on the Fourth  
Of July, heading to Santa Fe.

The sun sank in the Panhandle  
While the radio played country songs,  
And darkness dropped down all around.  
Small towns, on both sides of the road,

Began kindling up the night sky  
With rockets that sparkled and burst  
With bright streaks and stars. Soon  
Disappointment disappeared  
From the kids' faces. They gleamed  
Looking out at their windows wide-eyed.

# Cartesian Auto Body

LAWRENCE RHU

*“Son of man, can these bones live?” Ez 37:3*

I.

“The body and the engine are one,” declares  
Dnezivich, the Senior Specialist  
In Total Loss. “They’re indivisible,

A single unit.” Naturally, he prevails  
Though nature plays no part in his discourse.  
I haven’t heard so much philosophy

In years; it promptly silences appeals  
To values dutifully applied in practice:  
Required maintenance performed, as scheduled,

Every three months or three thousand miles.  
“Please, don’t bother with that bump or scratch,”  
I say to Frank at Suddeth Automotive.

“We need this van for work and family trips,  
Not for parades, although we love parades.”  
A visitor once peeked beneath the hood

And raved spontaneously in praise of what,  
To his surprise, he saw and heard inside:  
The clear efficient hum of finely tuned

Well-oiled parts, each performing its own role,  
Thanks to Frank, Amy, Mike, and John at Suddeth.  
*Could partial loss and total be the same?*

## II.

Seated by the fire in contemplation,  
Descartes resolved his fierce and vexing doubts.  
How could he *not* exist if he was doubting

His own existence? If he did not exist,  
Who was doing the doubting? As for you  
And me or others he might see pass by

In overcoats and hats outside his window,  
How could he know we were not *automata*,  
Wearing hats and coats, of course, but still,

Who could say for sure we were, like him, just folks  
In heavy clothes hustling down chilly streets?  
This dilemma did not lead Descartes to God.

Although he got there other ways, he left  
Us in the cold—automotons in hats  
And coats. Some things you never know for sure—

The authorship of Shakespeare's plays, the birth-  
Place of Obama. What makes me think I know  
I landed on the shores of light

In West Penn Hospital? Vertigos of doubt  
Can make heads spin, and quests for absolutes  
Are bound to fail. With standards high as those,

Descartes himself could not succeed. We know  
Foreseeably for sure that water boils  
At sea level at 212° ,

But we know we exist from inside out,  
Subjectively. Consider Hecht's "A Letter,"  
"I have been wondering what you are thinking about

"And by now suppose, it is certainly not me."  
Supposition here morphs into certainty  
Only if we trust the speaker. The unnamed

Addressee alone and only to herself  
Could verify this loner's abject claim.  
*Acknowledgement must own what can't be proved.*

### III.

But I'm in pain and you can recognize  
My pain. My humanity and yours become  
Discernible through agons such as these,

However minor. I'm no stoic hero  
 Nor am I a self-indulgent whiner.  
 I'll playfully recover from my loss,

Absorb the shock, laugh off the arbitrary  
 Damage at my insurance agency's  
 Expense of spirit. But, please, give me a moment.

Salvage yards keep calling me—four times  
 Yesterday, three times today. My loss,  
 They've heard, is total, but their interest

In my wiped out car belies that drastic claim,  
 Making me wonder, *What is in this deal*  
*For everybody else but me? Why strive*

*For what's worth less than its repair will cost?*  
 A chop shop lady dunned me pleasantly,  
 As though the vulture read *Miss Manners*.

Dnezivich recited his monadic premise  
 Regally, but somehow I forgot his words  
 Are only registers of market value.

*Shall I go mad with undue empathy*  
*Considering such conversations soul-*  
*To-soul? Please, don't let me forget again.*

#### IV.

In this regard my patience has a limit.  
 My driver's license designates that I'm  
 An organ donor. Mortality's enough

To make me glad to share with those in line  
And need of this or that—an eye or hand,  
A lung or liver—spare parts, which become

Useless to yours truly after my last breath.  
Meanwhile, if it's utility, not love,  
That brings you near, please, keep away from me

And from our minivan. Integrity's  
A task that I've been working on for decades  
Now, with mixed results but no surrender.

Although I set no such high standards  
For our aging storied family Odyssey,  
No rival theorist of value, no Senior

Specialist in Total Loss may stake  
A claim on any part of me or our  
Beloved Honda's body glorified.

## Hamlet 3

LAWRENCE RHU

On 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, beyond the bright marquee, alight with *Hamlet 2*,  
We find its star, Steve Coogan. He plays Dana Marschz,  
Who came from Canada to Tucson, my hometown, or so it seems  
At least as much as *Hamlet* seems a myth of origins  
Enabling our imaginations to conceive of selfhood  
In terms of consciousness as process, self-awareness  
Struggling to proceed, man or woman thinking,  
The American scholar in Wittenberg or Elsinor, Concord or Tucson—  
Wherever that might be or we might find ourselves.

Skull in hand, Hamlet stops to think, and thinks iconically,  
“Am I the cause of what I cause, the subject of what happens to me?”  
Essays, soliloquies, and *cogitos* put us in our place in time,  
With mysteries and problems to abide or solve  
Or, bit by bit, address somehow.

When I think of starting out, I think of Tucson:  
The Old Pueblo, *La Fiesta de los Vaqueros*,  
The Ash Alley Singers with Linda Ronstadt,  
The Indians’ spring training at Hi Corbett Field  
Nearby the public links. Once, on the first tee, Hoyt Wilhelm  
The famous knuckleballer joined Grandfather Ford and me.  
We played the front nine as a threesome.  
Hamlet then was beyond my ken.

From the championship tees, of course, the course plays differently,  
And distances in time will change, paradigms will shift.

When Camden, South Carolina's own Larry Doby was playing centerfield  
For Cleveland, Grandfather Ford took me to a church event  
To meet Jackie Robinson, who shook my hand with his much larger hand.

Born in Dundee, oldest of six, reared mainly by his mother—  
A milliner who always wore a bit of ruching at the neck  
And entered by the servants' door—  
Grandfather skipped high school to help support the family.  
When he worked at Pittsburgh's Stock Exchange,  
He'd leave at 3 for Forbes Field during baseball season.  
He shagged balls there and posted hits and runs  
On the scoreboard in leftfield. And he had tales to tell  
Of Honus Wagner, the Flying Dutchman, to a wide-eyed boy.  
Later, he became a Baptist minister—American, not Southern,  
He'd interject, as though those two were opposites.  
We might call him a self-made man, but isn't that heretical?  
Grandfather told congregations modest edifying jokes:  
The car he drove, which bore his name, was good enough for him.  
It took him where he wished to go. Often it took us to Oracle,  
North of Tucson, where he'd pinch-hit for another preacher.

I may have been star-struck, but I started hearing  
“Wish” and “need” as rivals for whatever I was seeking.  
Was our journey's end, somehow or not, achieved  
Step after step along the way? Or, even now, am I, retrospectively,  
Getting ahead of myself, out front and out of sync?

On 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, beyond the bright marquee, alight with *Hamlet 2*,  
We find Dana Marschz, who came from Canada to Tucson,

“Where,” he says, “dreams go to die.” Yet he proved otherwise,  
Directing West Mesa High’s production all the way  
To the Great White Way—and adding Jesus to the monstrous mix.

There, spectacularly, it flops,  
So Dana seeks to minimize his students’ disappointment,  
“No matter where you go, it will always be better than Tucson.”

There’s no West Mesa High in Tucson, Mesa is near Phoenix,  
*Hamlet 2* was filmed in Albuquerque.

Still I sing with gratitude for prehistorical deeds.

In the myth that heals my mind, they count. Their sum’s a figure in some cosmic tally.  
The practice range and public links at East Broadway  
And Alvernon define the real estate where I worked hard at play.  
Grandfather nursed my dreams as though they were his own  
And dreaming seems enough with such a guide to start  
From somewhere and to move ahead from there.

## “This Most Human Predicament”: Cavell on Language, Intention, and Desire in Shakespeare

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

In the second paragraph of “The Avoidance of Love,” the earliest of his essays on Shakespeare, Cavell asks, “What has discouraged attention from investigations of character?” in Shakespeare criticism of the mid-twentieth century. “What [...] has [instead] specifically motivated an absorbing attention to words?”, as in the criticism of William Empson and G. Wilson Knight. The answer that Cavell offers is that it is “the merest assumption,” foisted off on us “by some philosophy or other, that [literary] characters are not people, [and] that what can be known about people cannot be known about characters” (DK, 40).<sup>1</sup> Cavell then goes on to challenge this assumption by noting that it is at the very least quite natural “to account for the behavior of characters” by applying “to them [psychological predicates, like ‘is in pain,’ ‘is ironic,’ ‘is jealous,’ and ‘is thinking of ...’]” (DK, 40).

In one sense, then, Cavell is committed instead to treating characters as or as importantly like real people. This might well raise the worry that criticism based on this commitment is slack, inattentive, and emptily impressionistic relative to the real work of the plays, as if the practitioner of this criticism has somehow forgotten that plays are made materially out of words. If we are left only with the thoughts, say, that Hamlet is melancholy, Coriolanus is angry, or Othello is jealous, this worry might well be justified. Kenneth Burke, for example, charges the character criticism or “portraiture” practiced by A. C. Bradley and Samuel Johnson with just this kind of empty impressionism.

---

1. All references to Cavell’s Shakespeare essays will be to the appearance in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Stanley Bates usefully challenges the assumption that characters are not people and argues that our very idea of what a character is is formed as strongly by our experience of figures in literary texts, where plot abstracts and highlights related but temporally separated displays of temperament, interest, and son on, as by experience of actually existing people. “Character,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 393-419.

The risk in “portraiture” of the Bradleyan sort (and Samuel Johnson has done it admirably too, also with reference to Othello) is that the critic ends where he should begin. [...] Let the critic be as impressionistic as he wants, if he but realize that his impressions are the beginning of his task as a critic, not the end of it. Indeed, the richer his impressions the better, if he goes on to show how the author produced them. But the great risk in “conclusive” statements about a work is that they give us the feeling of conclusions when the real work of analysis is still before us.<sup>2</sup>

Here, for Burke, the real work of analysis must consist not in having impressions of characters as types, but instead in close attention to the specific words that Shakespeare or any other dramatist has used to make the characters who they are.

As Cavell rightly remarks on behalf of Coleridge and Bradley, however, and in turn also on behalf of the linguistic criticism of Empson and Wilson Knight, the assumption that interest in characters competes with interest in their specific words should surely be rejected.

Can Coleridge or Bradley really be understood as interested in characters *rather than* in the words of the play; or are the writings of Empson or G. Wilson Knight well used in saying that they are interested in what is happening in the words *rather than* what is happening in the speakers of the words? [...] The most curious feature of the shift and conflict between character criticism and verbal analysis is that it should have taken place at all. How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about specific characters is to care about the utterly specific words they say when and as they say them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them. Yet apparently both frequently happen. My purpose here is not to urge that in reading Shakespeare’s plays one put words back into the characters speaking them, and replace characters from our possession back into their words. The point is rather to learn something about what prevents these commendable activities from taking place. (DK, 39, 41)

---

2. Kenneth Burke, “Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method,” in *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, ed. Scott L. Newstok (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2007), 85.

As Cavell's engagements with Shakespeare develop throughout the essays that compose *Disowning Knowledge*, it emerges that the sorts of things that prevent these commendable activities include a materialist metaphysics (according to which the only real thing composing a play is pattern of ink on paper and the only thing composing an action is a bodily motion with an inner material cause) plus a kind of self-protective fear of engagement on the parts of readers, who might find their metaphysical and moral commitments challenged by the thought that some characters in dramas make available exemplarily valuable or horrific possibilities of action as such. As readers, that is, we tend to protect ourselves by covertly assuming models of reality, knowledge, and self that may be insupportable and that express an overriding commitment to the value of control, as achievable by detached internal intelligence facing off against inert, mere material nature. (Here the metaphysics and the fear may be internally related: fear of exposure to moral criticism of oneself by the text may motivate the pursuit of control over it, and commitment to detached control may help to suppress fear of exposure.) The work of challenging both materialist metaphysics and self-protective fears via readings of Shakespeare's plays then both requires and centers on the commendable activities of putting the words back into the characters speaking them and replacing characters from our (too-knowing) possession back into their self-possession in, by, and through their words. Or as Cavell puts it in the *Coriolanus* essay in his most direct methodological remark,

I might characterize my intention in spelling out what I call these fantasies [of *Coriolanus*] as an attempt to get at the origin of words, not the origin of their meaning exactly but of their production, of the value they have when and where they occur. I have characterized something like this ambition of criticism variously over the years, and related it to what I understand as the characteristic procedure of ordinary language philosophy (DK, 156).

From the very beginning of his career, Cavell's understanding of the characteristic procedure of ordinary language philosophy involved less a commitment to demotic ordinary speech as such, as a norm for all speech situations, than a psychoanalytically

inflected commitment to figuring out why *anyone* might utter *exactly these words* within a *very specific speech situation*.<sup>3</sup> This commitment on Cavell's part has evident affinities with any dramatist's commitment to, and with Shakespeare's genius for, getting exactly right the words that a genuinely human character within certain straits of circumstance, character, passion, and verbal talent would say when.<sup>4</sup>

That ordinary language must be both available as a vehicle for communication and for meaningful interaction among subjects, yet also open to change and never fully under the control of any individual subject, is a dominant theme of *The Claim of Reason*, especially of Chapter VII, "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language." Language must be, as Cavell puts it there, both stable enough to permit successful communicative and expressive use *and* tolerant of change. Nothing—no putative universal or fixed convention—can function as *the* meaning of a word, such that if one just knew *that* exact entity or fixed fact associated with the word, then one could be absolutely assured of the conditions of its correct application and so immunized against even the possibility of making a mistake. Or as Cavell picks up the thought in *Disowning Knowledge*:

words recur in foretellable contexts; there could be no words otherwise; and no intentions otherwise, none beyond the, let me say, natural expression of instinct; nothing would be an expression of desire, or ambition, or the making of a promise, or the acceptance of a prophecy. Unpredictable recurrence is not a sign of language's ambiguity but is a fact of language as such, that there are words (DK, 231-32).

This ontological fact about language—that it is both stable and tolerant, and that linguistic meaning depends on nothing more or less than human subjects continuing well enough and intelligibly enough to invest their recognitions, interests, and passions in what is mostly ordinarily done with words, even while change in usage is

---

3. On the role of Freud's work in shaping Cavell's thinking about specific uses of language and how to hear their many often multivalent and conflicting meanings, see Richard Eldridge, "Criticism and the Risk of the Self: Stanley Cavell's Modernism and Elizabeth Bishop's," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, eds. James Loxley and Andrew Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 92-105.

4. Stephen Greenblatt powerfully describes the development of what he calls Shakespeare's "new technique of radical excision" enabling "an intense representation of inwardness" in his essay "The Death of Hamnet and the Making of Hamlet," *The New York Review of Books* (October 21, 2004), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2004/10/21/the-death-of-hamnet-and-the-making-of-hamlet>.

possible—then has immediate consequences for the life of human subjects as such. One becomes a distinctively human subject—or enters into the role of a discursive, deliberating, reflective, subject, as opposed to being simply an empirically identifiable biological human being—over time, through training, by imitatively taking up the possibilities of communication and expression that come to dawn on the infant as manifest in the behaviors of grownups. Grownups being what they are, and relations with them on the part of infants being what they are, the development of a sense of what it is correct to say when is bound up with conflicting demands made on the infant and with the infant’s desperate wish to please parents and others who make these conflicting demands. Adventure and a sense of dawning cognitive, communicative, and expressive power are crossed for the infant with anxiety and frustration, as an ego develops caught between libidinal impulses and superego commands and prohibitions that are internalizations of the demands of others.<sup>5</sup>

One natural reaction to the agon of entry into language and into the life of a human subject is a wish to know absolutely and to have absolute control of the condi-

---

5. For an excellent survey of subject development that brings together Cavell’s work on language with Freud’s developmental psychology, see Marcia Cavell, *Becoming a Subject: Reflections in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). A second dramatic picture of subject development as it occurs through learning language within a field of contestation and accommodation occurs in R. G. Collingwood’s Hegel- and Spinoza-inspired account of language learning in *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 227-228, 239-240. Finally, compare Charles Petersen’s very apt summary of Cavell’s Freudian-inflected understanding of the stages of subject development: First, an ambition [Cavell] finds fundamental to the human condition: the desire to make the world more present, to experience the world even more directly, to know that another loves you, say, to the same degree that you love him. Second, since making the world more present becomes impossible, and we cannot know the love of another in the same way we know our love for that other, we arrive at the feeling of fraudulence (where others, since we can’t confirm their love, can’t confirm our love, so we doubt that even we do love), and skepticism (where others, since we can’t confirm their existence, can’t confirm our existence, so we doubt that we exist). Ever since Descartes first asked how he could be certain the world was not the work of a demon—the famous line of inquiry that led to modern skepticism—this problem has seemed little more than an intellectual exercise. Cavell makes skepticism fundamental, a relation to the world that comes not from the intellect but from (frustrated) desire. The third stage, then, is the attempt by philosophers (and writers of all kinds) to solve skepticism, to rid themselves of doubt and achieve certainty by abstracting the world, which Cavell interprets as a redoubling of skepticism—an attempt to again make the world more present not by acknowledging that frustrated first attempt but by ignoring it, or avenging it, “a kind of violence the human mind performs in response to its discovery of its limitation.” This is Cavell’s diagnosis of logical positivism, the philosophy of his peers. Next follows the fourth stage, represented by the work of the ordinary language philosophers: an attempt to return to all that had been left behind through the abstraction of everyday life. But this return is radically altered by the initial run-in with skepticism, such that what had been ordinary becomes uncanny, and the philosophers of ordinary language, as it were, discover for the first time the ordinary, the everyday, all that had previously been taken for granted. They thus point the way, though without going far enough. After skepticism, Cavell writes, “the everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appear [...] lost to us”; but the answer to skepticism is not a “philosophical construction,” not a treatise or a single technique, but the wholesale “reconstruction or resettlement of the everyday.” “Must We Mean What We Say?: On Stanley Cavell,” n+1, (11 February 2013), <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/must-we-mean-what-we-say>.

tions of linguistic-discursive-judgmental performance and of the actions that follow from judgment. This wish is the source of philosophy's repeated and repeatedly frustrated attempts to make contact with absolute givens that determine correct judgment. Plato's talk of abstract forms, Aristotle's of forms immanent in nature, Aquinas's of divine Providence, Descartes's of clear and distinct perceptions, Hegel's of the Absolute, and Marx's of species-being are all ways of giving expression to this natural wish that remains unappeasable within the ambit of ordinary experience. They promise, but in fact fail to yield, understanding of and resonance with something as a source of absolute assurance and orientation in one's life as a subject. Alternatively one might accept one's complete powerlessness and ability to judge and act according to reason by embracing Humean skepticism and naturalism. Here one is promised freedom from responsibility for orientations and relationships, but with the implausible cost of being able to do nothing, as if all one's bodily motions and utterances were necessarily no more actively formed or alterable than is the turning green of leaves when chlorophyll production diminishes with falling temperatures.

Both these flawed strategies for coping with the agon of the inheritance of language are absolutist, in resting on an all-or-nothing assumption. Either we are, or can become, absolute masters, or we are absolute victims. But this all-or-nothing assumption is the very thought that should be rejected. We are, instead, always at stake and at risk in judgment and in action (even if sometimes the stakes are low and easily met). We cannot stand on self-enclosed, internalized intentions (formed either under contact with absolutes or passively under conventions); we always mean more in what we say and do than we can fully control, and we are always responsible for coming to reasonable enough terms with that fact. That we must mean what we say is both a description of commitments enacted in judgment and action that outrun our foresight *and* a normative demand to take responsibility for our commitments as best we can with our finite foresight and finite accomplished powers.<sup>6</sup> "Intension [a mean-

---

6. Anthony J. Cascardi aptly notes that "The disclosure of our commitments in what we say, together with an account of what it means to honor or to skirt them, is as important as anything in Cavell's work. ...Cavell portrays his engagements with Shakespeare as unavoidable because it is Shakespeare who, above all writers, explores the full range of the commitments that language entails. The power of Shakespeare's work rests on his ability to envision characters who live out the fate of their words relentlessly, without compromise or escape, or who suffer disasterously from their failure to do so." ("Disowning Knowledge': Cavell on Shakespeare," in *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 190-205, at 190.

ing-entity grasped and enclosed within the subject] is not a substitute for intention [or what is always expressed and at stake in action],” as Cavell puts in in “Must We Mean What We Say?”<sup>7</sup> we should reject the thought that “if intention counts for anything in meaning, it counts for everything” (DK, 240). Or, in a wonderful question that occurs in the collection *In Quest of the Ordinary*, “Is W. C. Fields our only alternative to Humpty Dumpty?”<sup>8</sup> The standing fact of our lives with language as human subjects, as *Disowning Knowledge* puts it, is that

you always tell more and tell less than you know. Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* draws this most human predicament into philosophy, forever returning to philosophy’s ambivalence, let me call it, as between wanting to tell more than words can say and wanting to evade telling altogether—an ambivalence epitomized in the wish to speak “outside language games,” a wish for language to do, the mind to be) everything and nothing. Here I think again of Emerson’s wonderful saying in which he detects the breath of virtue and vice that our character “emits” at every moment, words so to speak always before and beyond themselves, essentially and unpredictably recurrent, say rhythmic, fuller of meaning than can be exhausted (DK, 201).

Within this most human predicament, character and one’s uses of language in judgments, together with the actions that express them, are each other’s obverse and reverse, each being and meaning what they are only in relation to each other. Burdened by multiple, conflicting demands, coming from other subjects, freighted with anxieties, and haunted by fantasies, yet in possession of some possibilities of agency and expression, our words—anyone’s words—must at some level reveal our complex lives as subjects.<sup>9</sup>

---

7. Cavell, “Must We Mean What We Say?,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 29.

8. Cavell, “Being Odd, Getting Even (Poe, Descartes, Emerson),” in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 117. The thought here, of course, is that there is some alternative open to us between Humpty Dumpty’s world- and other-denying claim to be absolute master of what words mean and W. C. Fields’s sullen, depressive, alcoholic resentfulness at the antics of children and café waitresses.

9. Cascardi registers this point in noting that “Cavell’s analyses of Shakespeare are rooted in a conviction that Shakespeare’s characters *must* mean what they say, and mean it thoroughly, unless of course they are in a posture of avoidance, in which case their words may reveal whatever it is they might wish to disown. It bears upon us as readers and critics of these plays to suppose this and nothing less.” (“Disowning Knowledge’: Cavell on Shakespeare, 193.)

This most human predicament is arguably felt to be more pressing in modernity, from say roughly the early 14<sup>th</sup> century in Italy (Petrarch) onwards, as emerging transportation networks, developing urbanization, and improved technologies of production (themselves all resting on skill development in pursuit of genuine human interests) begin to make less repetitively local and more diverse and skill-based social identities available.<sup>10</sup> But it is also arguably an ontological predicament that attaches to human life with language as such, with economic scarcities and facts of coercive power sometimes acting to inhibit the emergence of a felt sense of this predicament. A sense of human life as open to exercises of creative power and conversion of interest is certainly evident as early as in the Platonic texts and in early Christianity, as well as in modernity.

For those caught within this predicament who have both a strong sense of it and possess substantial imaginative power and self-discipline, so that they might inaugurate new possibilities of life, there is a natural tendency to experience what Cavell elsewhere calls the uncanniness of the ordinary: a sense that

the everyday is ordinary because, after all, it is our habit, or habitat; but since that very inhabitation is from time to time perceptible to us—we who have constructed it—as extraordinary [sometimes in its decadence and resistance to full expressions of creative individuality]—, we conceive that some place elsewhere, or this place otherwise constructed, must be what is ordinary to us, must be what romantics—of course including both E.T. and Nicholas Nickleby’s alter ego Smike—call “home.”<sup>11</sup>

---

10. Jay Bernstein dwells on Cavell’s perception that modernity is an age of subjectivity prominently foregrounded and individualized, but therein also prominently detached from love and community. Cavell’s “idea of saving ‘love for the world [until it is responsive again]’ is intended as a way of expressing, at least, that love of the world is no longer possible because the world is no longer lovable, [...] and hence that our attachment to life, however fierce and insistent, is smaller, meaner, narrower. [...] [Cavell’s claim is] that love, or what we think of as love, and subjectivity as we have inherited it from the exemplary instances of Hamlet and Descartes, are all but incommensurable. [...] *Hamlet* begins, and so modernity begins, with the loss of the king-father and the queen-mother, that is, not only with the loss of the ideal god-like father and goddess-like mother, but thereby with the loss of father and mother as the (representative) sources of ideality, sources of meaningful order.” (“How Tragedy Ends,” in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature, and Criticism*, 106-122, at 106, 108, citing Cavell, “A Matter of Meaning It,” in Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 213-237, at 229.)

11. Cavell, “The Philosopher in American Life,” in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 9.

Within the grip of this sense, there is then for those with visionary power a standing tendency to deny the significance of the fallen ordinary as it stands in favor of the pursuit of a reformed, different, more meaningful ordinary. Both the skeptic's repudiations of ordinary knowledge and the systematizing philosopher's turn to a world of forms or the will of God or a world of absolutized mathematical physics are disciplined efforts to deny the significance of the ordinary.

The systematizing philosopher's efforts at radically new intelligibility founder, however,<sup>12</sup> and there is, by Cavell's lights, no intellectual way out of this condition: the truth of skepticism—its correct perception that meaningfulness is not as fully present and lived as it is felt it ought to be; its “expression of an awareness that presentness was threatened, gone” (DK, 95)—is “that while criteria provide conditions of (shared) speech, they do not provide an answer to skeptical doubt” (DK, 205-6). From within either the skeptical or the systematizing impulse,<sup>13</sup> “acknowledging that the world exists, that you know for yourself that it is yours, is not so clear a process” (DK, 203). Skepticism—more honestly and directly so than its systematizing double and rival—is “an intellectualization of some prior intimation” of lost or absent meaningfulness (DK, 206). It is “an expression of the human wish to escape the bounds or bonds of the human, if not from above then from below, [...] the human craving for, and horror of, the inhuman, of limitlessness, of monstrousness” (DK 229). It is “a power that all who possess language possess and may desire: to dissociate oneself, excommunicate oneself from the community, in whose agreement, mutual attunement, words exist,” for the sake of a better one, or, failing that, for the sake of intactness, privacy, and (fantasized) invulnerability. Sceptics at times are we all.

Shakespearean tragedy is then “an interpretation of what skepticism is an interpretation of”: our human predicament, that we live within “the human fatedness to

---

12. In Eldridge, “Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism,” I trace, following Cavell, the continual surging forth of this effort and its foundering in *Philosophical Investigations*.

13. Cascardi notes correctly that “Cavell's work is to dismantle the opposition between skepticism and epistemology, rather than to oppose skepticism by proposing an alternative to epistemology. ...In Cavell's readings, Shakespearean tragedy and romance are interpreted as presenting openings into the problems of skepticism and knowledge that lie beyond, or beneath, what philosophy conventionally imagines to be at stake in them. [...] Shakespeare's texts ask us to take account of the full measure of what skepticism means and thereby challenge us to confront those things for which epistemology has come to be a cover. [...] What epistemology *avoids* must be something that 'knowing' cannot provide. Indeed, knowing serves as the excuse, the cover, or the alibi for what ought to be acknowledged.” (“Disowning Knowledge: Cavell on Shakespeare,” pp. 191, 192, 194.

significance, [...] victims of intelligibility,” both its fact and its limits. (DK 5, 95).<sup>14</sup> Hence Cavell’s character criticism is not an impressionistic encounter with singular eccentricities or, as it were, denizens of possible worlds. It is instead a criticism of human character, fated always to partial significance, as it appears within an individual within a particular set of highly straitened circumstances, ambitions, power, and desire. Lear’s skeptical impulse is toward withdrawal and hiddenness, an “attempt to avoid recognition, the shame of exposure, the threat of self-revelation” (DK, 58). Coriolanus’s takes the form of “disgust with the world, [...] a vision of communication as contamination, the discovery that human existence is inherently undistinguished” (DK, 12). Macbeth’s seeks “deeds done in the doing without consequence, when surcease is success, [in name of] a wish for there to be no human action, no separation of consequence from intention, no gratification of desire, no showing of one’s hand in what happens [...]—a wish to escape the human” (DK, 233). Othello’s takes the form of murderous jealousy driven by a wish to preserve his in-tactness, apartness, and invulnerability to the claims of ordinary love.

Happily, however, we are not fully fated to follow these figures in their shames, disgusts, and murderous rages. In his sunniest book, *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell describes how some couples, through a combination of luck, wit, readiness to have fun, and acceptance of chastenings, may “trace the progress from narcissism and incestuous privacy to objectivity and the acknowledgment of otherness as the path and goal of human happiness.”<sup>15</sup> Skills in managing this progress, are, however, fragile, and we live “between avoidance and acknowledgment,” and so open to being caught to various degrees within both the tragic skepticisms of Lear, Coriolanus, Macbeth, and Othello and the happinesses in joint purposiveness of Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant and Irene Dunne, and Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. This betweenness—our human predicament, our fatedness to (limited) intelligibility and to

---

14. This should not rule out the further thoughts that men and women, say, or the masculine and the feminine, may experience this fatedness differently. As Cascardi puts it, “The idea, not inconsistent with some feminisms, is that men are rather less certain than women of their bodily existence and continuity with others, and in the face of those uncertainties are drawn to what the world has come to call ‘heroism,’ ‘achievement,’ or ‘originality.’” (“Disowning Knowledge’: Cavell on Shakespeare,” p. 199. It is surely no accident that Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists are (all but) all men.

15. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 102. Derek Gottlieb, in *Skepticism and Belonging in Shakespeare’s Comedies* (London: Routledge, 2016) follows out this thought in taking Cavell’s work in *Pursuits of Happiness* to provide a lens for re-reading Shakespeare’s major comedies, themselves a major inspiration (by way of Northrop Frye) for Cavell’s comedy of remarriage book.

fantasies of overcoming or escaping it—then entails its continual expression in our lives and its continual expression and rescruinizing in the art that engages with our lives. “Apart from the wish for selfhood,” as always to be more fitly achieved, Cavell writes, “hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness, I do not understand the value of art. Apart from this wish and its achievement, art is exhibition.”<sup>16</sup> *Disowning Knowledge* is Cavell’s account of Shakespeare’s art, and its tracking major forms of the accomplishment of selfhood under the tragic but all too human conditions of domination by a wish for absolute orientation, assurance, and control.

---

16. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 22.