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Kingdom and Exile

A study in Stanley Cavell's philosophical
modernism and its dilemmas

Thesis for the degree doctor philosophiae

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
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Introduction

Philosophical modernism and Cavell's “politics of interpretation”

*The topics of the modern, of the philosophy of philosophy, and of the form of philosophical writing, come together in the question: What is the audience of philosophy? For the answer to this question will contribute to the answer to the questions: What is philosophy? How is it to be written?*¹

Cavell once claimed that ordinary language philosophy is “a mode of interpretation and inherently involved in the politics of interpretation.” [Cavell 88: 28] My contention is that in this quote we have the key to Cavell’s philosophy, which is the key to the question of what Cavell *wants* from ordinary language philosophy. Why does he keep writing essay after essay in the same convoluted and idiosyncratic style, texts having apparently neither a self-contained start nor a definitive ending? Consider for instance the breathless, half-page opener of *The Claim of Reason*, offering a multicaused conditional, a massive qualification, taking off with “If not at the beginning of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, since what starts philosophy is no more to be known at the outset than how to make an end of it; and not at the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*, since its opening is not to be confused with the starting of the philosophy it expresses ...” and winding down with “... then where and how are we to approach this text?” [Cavell 99: 3] In the course of this half-page sentence Cavell lays down several parameters regarding his reading of the *Investigations* (or PU – *Philosophische Untersuchungen*.) One might call it a “policy of interpretation”, a policy that could as well apply to those who want to read *Cavell*. Chiefly, the policy is

¹ From the “updated edition” of *Must We Mean What We Say?* [Cavell 02: xxxvii]

- (1) that the terms “in which the opening might be understood can hardly be given along with the opening itself”,
- (2) that the way “this work is written is internal to what it teaches”, and finally,
- (3) that one should realize that the work is written “in criticism of itself.”

There is a parallel here to the reception of Cavell’s own work. Because when Cavell asks of the PU in the next phrase, “How shall we let this book teach us, this or anything?”, we might indeed pose the same question in regard to *his* writing. That there is something peculiar with Cavell’s very mode of writing philosophy, his *style*, can hardly be denied. It has a virtuosi, almost musical quality, as if Cavell wishes to control every single philosophical note or atom of his text, indeed, as if everything he wanted to convey depended on the exact hitting off of every single consonance and dissonance, which together produces a – supposedly – meaningful *whole*. In that sense one could say that Cavell *performs* his work as much as he writes it. But after all, Cavell is a philosopher, not a musician, though he was a student of music before he became a student of philosophy.² What is the *point* of his virtuosity? If Cavell wants *something* from Wittgenstein, and from ordinary language philosophy in general (OLP), why does he not simply come out and say what that something *is*? Or at least why does he not give his search for it a relatively straightforward expression? My answer is: What Cavell wants from ordinary language philosophy is nothing simple, hence it cannot be simply put. If anything, he wishes to make ordinary language philosophy seem *less* simple. “What Austin did mean by ‘ordinary’ is not”, Cavell writes in ‘The Politics of Interpretation’, “... and cannot be, easy to say.” [Cavell 88: 37] That is, Cavell wants to portray ordinary language philosophy in a less simple way than how it is often tempting to render it. In other words I am suggesting that a main thrust of Cavell’s philosophy *is* to resist temptations of simplification. To make things that seem easy look less easy is part of Cavell’s “policy of interpretation”, and this is what is mirrored in what I regard as his “modernist” philosophical style.

Thus I am trying to show that Cavell’s *style* of approaching his subject, his very way of writing, is indicative or symptomatic of the nature of his project. Cavell is trying to say, on my account, that to say what ordinary language philosophy *is*, is not so easy as people tend to think it is, and the “difficult” way in which Cavell tries to say this, in a way proves, or at least illustrates, his point. That is, it proves Cavell’s point as long as the difficulty of his texts does

² Studying composition at Berkeley under the tutelage of Ernest Bloch, in the Schönberg and Stravinsky era.

not emerge as gratuitous; the crux is, of course, like in modernist art, to make the complications, the departures from standard solutions, seem justified. This implies that the critic of Cavell's philosophy, like the critic of a work of modernist art, is faced with the task of demonstrating the *inner necessity* of the author's treatment of a certain subject in a certain style. So when I claimed that the quotation about the politics of interpretation provides a key to the reading of Cavell's work, I am not suggesting that it will make Cavell's texts look easy. What it *will* do, I hope, is to spare us the pains of trying to find simplicity where there is none to be found.

Hence, my first and foremost hermeneutic premise is that if one goes to Cavell's work in order to find an introduction to the subject of ordinary language philosophy, or to the PU, one is bound to be frustrated. To begin at the "beginning" would be contrary to his modernism. It would be like going to the mature Picasso to get an introduction to the art of portraiture, or to Joyce for an introduction to the novel, or to Becket to the theatre. Cavell's way of exploring ordinary language philosophy is to submit it to a "critique"; challenge it from within, like Picasso and Joyce and Becket explored the boundaries of their chosen forms from within. Hence the traditional forms, maintains the modernist, are not merely to be adopted; they must be critically *tested* by each new generation, to see if they still have the power to *convince*. This becomes the fateful dilemma of a self-consciously modernist philosophy too, as Cavell confirms in a recent updating of *Must We Mean What We Say?*:

It is the difficulty modern philosophy shares with the modern arts (and, for that matter, with modern theology), a difficulty broached, or reflected, in the nineteenth-century's radical breaking of tradition within the several arts ... This is the beginning of what I have called the modern, characterizing it as a moment in which history and its conventions can no longer be taken for granted; the time in which music and painting and poetry (like nations) have to define themselves against their pasts; the beginning of the moment in which each of the arts becomes its own subject, as if its immediate artistic task is to establish its own existence. *The new difficulty which comes to light in the modernist situation is that of maintaining one's belief in one's own enterprise, for the past and the present become problematic together.* [Cavell 02: xxxvi, my italic]

Just like the work of Picasso and Joyce and Becket presuppose a certain knowledge of the *traditions* of painting and literature and drama, so does the work of Cavell presuppose a certain knowledge of the philosophical tradition, including the tradition of ordinary language

philosophy, as well as the traditions *it* reacts to. As T. S. Eliot wrote in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ – and I quote at length, because I believe that if we substitute the words “philosopher” and “philosophy” for those of “art” and “artist” we have an ideal-typical statement not only of aesthetical modernism, but of *philosophical* modernism as well:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone ... You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of æsthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. [Eliot 98: 119]

In other words, lacking familiarity with what the authors (whether artists or philosophers) are *reacting* to, and why, and how, in what terms, on what conditions, one risks ending up saying “oh yes, this is all very fascinating, but what is the *point* of it?” One way of tackling this dilemma is to leave the subject at that. Another way of tackling it is to use this feeling of fascination or mystification as a motivation for backtracking to the conditions of the work at hand in previous works. That is, to find some pretext that makes the current text make sense in view of a relation of succession. Needless to say, the latter option is what I propose we pursue in respect to Cavell’s work. And the presuppositions of Cavell’s work, the pretexts, I locate in two main sources: (1) The movement(s) of modernism, and (2) the works of “orthodox” (=established) ordinary language philosophy. The latter, I stress, provides a somewhat *negative* precedent to Cavell; it is, so to speak, the *outstanding problems* of “orthodox” ordinary language philosophy that Cavell is interested in; what it has overlooked, repressed or failed to deal with in a satisfactory manner.

A bit of textual-biographical evidence might be offered at this point. What I have in mind is a passage from the introduction to *Conditions Handsome & Unhandsome* (CH&UH.) In the passage I am thinking of, Cavell is clarifying his attitude to the “standard” approaches of Anglo-Saxon philosophy – which could be characterized as a mix of pragmatism (the

“American” strain) and ordinary language philosophy (the “British” strain) – when he encountered it as a student. Namely Cavell writes that:

...I remember, when first beginning to read what other people called philosophy, my growing feeling [that] the world [it] was responding to and responding from missed the worlds I seemed mostly to live in, missing the heights of modernism in the arts, the depths of psychoanalytic discovery, the ravages of the century’s politics, the wild intelligence of American popular culture. Above all, missing the question, and the irony in philosophy’s questioning, whether philosophy, however reconstructed, was any longer possible, and necessary, in this world. [Cavell 90: 13]

I am contending that Cavell’s treatment of ordinary language philosophy primarily makes sense if one has come to a point where one is ready to challenge (or see challenged) the “orthodoxy” of ordinary language philosophy – which means that one must *already* have grasped the point and value of that orthodoxy – just like it primarily makes sense to study Schönberg’s atonal music (or say Picasso’s cubism) when one has come to a point where one is ready to see the need for challenging tonal orthodoxy (or the central perspective) from within the tradition of tonality (or realism) itself, something which presupposes that one has already appreciated the significance of the discovery of tonality and perspective. And crucially, in philosophy like in art, this process of criticizing the past and attempting to appropriate it for the future, inevitably leads to the question – at one point or another – if the tradition *can* be continued at all. Is there still room for art in this world? For philosophy? Or is philosophy “dead”, as some claim art is, has it come to an “end”, overtaken by other cultural paradigms? Has philosophy as such, as some say of art (from time to time), become mired in kitsch, clichés, anachronisms, academicisms? What are the conditions for philosophy’s continued *meaning*?

To get a sense of the confluence of philosophical and aesthetical modernism in Cavell’s thinking, consider what he writes about the formative days when he was gradually converting himself from a musician to a philosopher, from an artist to a thinker:³

³ Incidentally mirroring, to a certain extent, the intellectual development of Theodor Adorno. Indeed, although Cavell does not go out of his way to relate Adorno to his project (hence neither will I, for reasons of space) the knowledgeable reader will recognize his spirit in much of Cavell’s work, as well as in my treatment of it. Of course, the spirit of Adorno is central to the very idea of a philosophical modernism, especially as manifested in the desire to incorporate the tenets of aesthetical modernism in philosophical discourse.

...I would find that I was as interested in the understanding of [the music] I heard, as thrilled by the drama of the teaching of it, as I was interested in the rightness and beauty of what I heard; they were not separate. The assigned question of hearing, of an ear, produced a private triumph, and spoke decisively, unforgettably, of a world of culture beyond the standing construction of the world. Yet I did not want this transcendence of culture to require a comparatively rare talent, even a competition of talents, in order to participate in it. I began reading Plato, Confucius, Stanislavsky, as well as Schumann's criticism. [Cavell 96a: 50]

Here Cavell says quite plainly that his early experiences with the questions of aesthetical meaning became a guiding thread for his questioning of the philosophical project and the experiences pertinent to it. On a modernist model, the question if what one tries to do is any longer possible becomes, like in art, at a certain historical juncture an integral part of philosophy itself. Writes Cavell:

Positivism's answer [to how philosophy should be continued], the reigning answer in the professional philosophy of the America in which I was beginning to read philosophy, shared pragmatism's lack of irony in raising the question of philosophy – in the idea that philosophy is to be brought to an end by philosophy; which in a sense is all that can preserve philosophy; and in the fact that the major modern philosophers, from Descartes and Locke and Hume to Nietzsche and Heidegger and Wittgenstein, have wished to overcome philosophy philosophically ... But then positivism harbored no particular longing for a cultural or intellectual role for philosophy apart from its relation to logic and science. [Cavell 90: 14]

One aim of the present dissertation is therefore to show that Cavell very rapidly took a *critical* stance versus the solidifying “tradition” of ordinary language philosophy (especially that tradition's view of the tradition that had gone before, the tradition of “metaphysics”); that is, I will argue that Cavell from the very inception of his published work implicitly and explicitly *challenged* the standard (i.e. “simple”) ways of presenting and developing his subject. As Cavell wrote in 1965, in the essay ‘Austin at Criticism’:

The phrase “ordinary language” is, of course, of no special interest; the problem is that its use has so often quickly suggested that the answers to the fundamental questions it raises, or ought to raise, are known, whereas they are barely imagined [Cavell 94: 99]

Here Cavell is clearly warning his fellow ordinary language philosophers against taking for granted that they know what their subject is about. In fact he is saying that one does not

really, at this point (or that point, or perhaps not at *any* point), really know what ordinary language philosophy *is*. Of course the *simple* answer, then and now, to the question “what is the practice of ordinary language philosophy?” is something on the order of “to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” or “to treat the treatment of a philosophical question like the treatment of an illness.” But that hardly exhausts what *Cavell* wants from ordinary language philosophy. One might even say these formulas tend to obscure it. Rather, as I have suggested, I think the point of Cavell’s writings is to encourage us to think of ordinary language philosophy in other terms than those suggested in a basic introduction. Cavell wants us to question our *picture* of ordinary language philosophy, our picture of Austin, Wittgenstein and their legacy. Or in more Kantian terms, Cavell wants to rouse us from our “dogmatic slumber,” he wants to render a “critique” of our received opinions about ordinary language philosophy, what it can and cannot do, and what we need it for.

To Cavell this is a version of the notion that in modernity the question of philosophy’s fate becomes part of philosophy itself; indeed, he sees the fundamental contribution of Austin and Wittgenstein to be the enabling of the posing of this question:

I might express my particular sense of indebtedness to the teaching of Austin and to the practice of Wittgenstein by saying that it is from them that I learned of the possibility of making my difficulties about philosophy into topics within philosophy itself – so that, for example, my doubts about the relevance of philosophy now, its apparent irrelevance to the motives which brought me to the subject in the first place, were no longer simply obstacles to the philosophical impulse which had to be removed *before* philosophy could begin, hence motives for withdrawing from the enterprise. It was now possible to investigate philosophically the very topic of irrelevance, and therewith the subject of philosophy itself [Cavell 02: xxxvi]

Specifically, I will contend that Cavell’s view of ordinary language philosophy does *not* necessarily imply the abolishment or abandonment of traditional philosophical or “metaphysical” issues. Rather Cavell’s work implies a radical rethinking and recasting of those issues, one that we could call “modernist.” This starts to lay bare what I think Cavell’s “politics” of interpretation is *really* about: It is a way of interpreting the philosophical project that could variously be described, apart from modernist, as romanticist, utopian and *redemptive*.

Clearly, no-one can deny that one of the most famous statements in the *Investigations* is that “What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (§116.) In a similar vein we find the comparison of philosophy with therapy: “The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness” (§255.) It is hardly surprising that commentators have seized on just *these* paragraphs in order to paint a unified – and simple – picture of Wittgenstein’s work and of ordinary language philosophy in general. If one is looking for a quick solution to the riddle of Wittgenstein’s work, not to say a quick fix for the malady of philosophy, these formulations should be warmly welcomed. For instance, those well-known paragraphs apparently fit neatly with von Wright’s analysis in ‘Wittgenstein in Relation to His Times’:

Because of the interlocking of language and ways of life, a disorder in the former reflects a disorder in the latter. If philosophical problems are symptomatic of language producing malignant outgrowths which obscure our thinking, then there must be a cancer in the *Lebensweise*, in the way of life itself. [Mulhall 96: 336]

Yet this way of reading Wittgenstein, uncritically propagating a pathologist’s imagery of cures and diseases, as Cavell makes clear in *Declining Decline*, is not *his* way of reading Wittgenstein. It is not Cavell’s way of reading because von Wright’s interpretation strikes Cavell as somehow reductive of the dilemmas of the human condition, as well as crude regarding the relevance of Wittgenstein’s work to those dilemmas, to the leading of a human life. In short, von Wright’s reading is too confining according to Cavell, not sufficiently geared to the complexities of Wittgenstein’s texts, their dialectical twists and turns that makes it ill-advised to pick out a small number of fragments, such as §116 and §255, and portray them as exhaustive of Wittgenstein’s thought. After all, we should take into account that Wittgenstein never professed to carry a clear-cut message, but instead noted in the preface to the *Investigations* that after “several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into [a whole], I realized that I should never succeed ... this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation.” [Wittgenstein 58: ix] Wittgenstein also noted that he never wanted to spare people the “trouble of thinking,” which ought to be as firm a warning against the dangers of letting an orthodoxy solidify around his writings as anything. Thus reading Wittgenstein in keeping with his specific way of writing, his *style*, Richard Eldridge contends in *Leading a Human Life*, very much in the spirit of Cavell:

...would require a vigilant refusal to draw any distinction between the treatment of understanding and the treatment of philosophy, between philosophy and metaphilosophy, between the teaching of the text and its form. ... The text's saying and thinking things – or, better, its ways of entertaining ways of saying and thinking things – [should not] be parted from its form, and the conceptions it encodes of how things honestly can be thought and said, of when and in connection with which projects such sayings and thinkings can arise, leading to what forms of closure or dissipation or exhaustion in thinking. [Eldridge 97: 213]

If we bring these complexities into the picture a more nuanced, sometimes even contradictory view of life and language emerges in the diverse and open-ended writings of Wittgenstein. As Cavell argues in response to von Wright:

I think the griefs to which language repeatedly comes in the PU should be seen as normal to it, as natural to human language as scepticism is ... The philosophically pertinent griefs to which language comes are not disorders, if that means they hinder its working; but are essential to what we know as the learning or sharing of language, to our attachment to our language; they are functions of its *order*. [Mulhall 96: 337]

The same could be inveighed against any number of orthodox accounts of Wittgenstein that takes it for granted that Wittgenstein has shown how the issues of metaphysics/skepticism can actually be *dissolved* once and for all. In contrast to those who try to distill a general solution from his writings, for example in terms of the concept of rules, Wittgenstein stresses that none of his concepts can provide a *complete* solution; they are mere devices used in particular contexts, therefore “problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.” [PU §133] Keeping such passages in mind, I will try to show that Cavell's appropriation of Wittgenstein (and the legacy of ordinary language philosophy in general) can be understood as self-consciously unorthodox, not to say anti-orthodox. To use Wittgenstein's own vocabulary, we might say that Cavell questions the *pictures* that have been imposed on Wittgenstein's work. Pictures that have, as it were, held our reading of Wittgenstein captive. Getting those pictures out of the way (i.e. making new and more perspicuous ones), we might start to make sense of enigmatic Wittgensteinian remarks such as

I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: Philosophy ought really to be written only as poetic composition. It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing

myself as someone who cannot do what he would like to be able to do.
[Wittgenstein 80: 24]

It is this Wittgenstein I presume, overlooked by the “orthodoxy”, that Cavell attempts to put us on the track of, that is, facilitate a more productive image of.⁴

“We have all, I assume”, as Cavell notes in ‘The *Investigations*’ everyday aesthetics of itself,’ “heard it said that Wittgenstein is a writer of unusual powers.” [Gibson 04: 21] But, as Cavell goes on to wonder, is that writing essential to Wittgenstein’s philosophizing? Cavell’s answer is of course yes, and this, as we have indicated, is in his view what opens our eyes to the “other” Wittgenstein. Yet the same thing could be asked about *Cavell’s* literary style. Is his writing essential to *his* philosophizing? And I have indeed indicated that I will answer this question in the affirmative. Therefore, as we shall see in the following, I think that if we consider the idiosyncratic style of Cavell’s writing, as well as its unusual juxtaposition of themes, we arrive at the conclusion that one should read Cavell’s texts as not only directed against the “skeptics” vis-à-vis ordinary language philosophy; one should also read Cavell’s texts as styled against the overly “dogmatic” adherents of ordinary language philosophy. It is in the process of threading this dialectical path between “skepticism” and “dogmatism,” I will argue, that Cavell arrives at his personal, and as I see it, characteristically *modernist* form of ordinary language philosophy. And most crucially, this modernist approach to ordinary language philosophy, is what prompts Cavell to a reconsideration of what “traditional” philosophy is, and how that tradition can be interpreted in a “redemptive” way *through* the insights of ordinary language philosophy. This, as I have suggested, I take to be Cavell’s “politics of interpretation”.⁵

This view is supported by Cavell’s insistence that at a certain point he not only came to appreciate “the power of traditional epistemology, and in particular of skepticism,” but he also, as he continues, came to see that

...everything that I had said ... in defense of the appeal to ordinary language could also be said in defense, rather than criticism, of the claims of traditional philosophy; this idea grew on me into an ideal of

⁴ Compare the introduction to *The Literary Wittgenstein* (Gibson 04.) See also *The New Wittgenstein* (Crary 01.) Both prominently feature contributions by Cavell, respectively, ‘Excursus on Wittgenstein’s vision of language’ and ‘The *Investigations*’ everyday aesthetics of itself.’

⁵ In Chapter 9 we shall see how this relates to politics more generally, as we discuss Cavell’s appropriation of Plato’s *Republic*.

criticism, and it is central to all my work in philosophy since then.
[Cavell 94: xii]

Indeed, more than twenty years later, looking back at this phase of his work, Cavell wrote in 'The Politics of Interpretation' regarding the relationship between ordinary language philosophy and "what we allowed ourselves to call the tradition", the words I started this introduction with, namely: "ordinary language philosophy is a mode of interpretation and inherently involved in the politics of interpretation." [Cavell 88: 28]

My conclusion, or rather my starting-point for further investigation, based on the kind of considerations reviewed above, is that Cavell is far from recommending, in the name of ordinary language and its newfound philosophical elaboration, a simple dissolution of the concerns of the philosophical tradition, not even of those commonly labeled "metaphysical." If this goes against the orthodoxy of ordinary language philosophy, then Cavell's philosophy of ordinary language *is* unorthodox. Which is of course what I claim, and what I am about to spell out in the pages that follow. Namely, I will discuss:

- (i) Cavell's philosophical style in relation to those of Austin and Wittgenstein; Cavell's criticism of "orthodox" ordinary language philosophy; Gellner and Marcuse's criticism of OLP. Affeldt's criticism of Mulhall's reading of Cavell. The notion of "acknowledgment"; parallels in Hegel, Marx and Freud. Shakespeare, theatricality and alienation.
- (ii) Cavell's criticism of Kripke – rules vs. forms of life/attunement; attempts at extending Cavell's ideas in a more systematic direction: "seeing aspects" as a notion of attunement.
- (iii) The radical problematic of the self in Cavell; the "unattained"; Emersonian perfectionism, connections to eschatology.
- (iv) The modern self, aesthetics and philosophy; tragedy, romanticism, exile; Cavell and the arts, cinema and modernity; stylistic implications; modernism and "counter-philosophy".
- (v) The "politics of interpretation"; dilemmas regarding institutions and principles; the problem with Cavell's reading of the *Republic*; the lack of a return to the world of the polis.

Chapter 1

The unorthodox Cavell

J. L. Austin died in 1960, leaving behind a legacy of seven published papers that, relative to their size and number and orientation, were to have an immense impact on posterity. Like any rich legacy, it was bound to generate controversy over who was to inherit it, and how. Cavell, who had been taught personally by Austin, could hardly but enter this fray. Five years after Austin's death Cavell felt obliged to submit in the discussion-section of *The Philosophical Review* ('Austin at Criticism'), that he wished "not so much to try to characterize Austin's procedures as to warn against too hasty or simple a description of them" and that "their characterization is itself, or ought to be, as outstanding a philosophical problem as any to be ventured from within those procedures. [Cavell 94: 99] Cavell's response to the predicament of inheriting Austin has proven neither hasty nor simple. Indeed, the unremitting reflection on this "outstanding" problem is in a sense the continuous thread running through the work of Stanley Cavell. Or put otherwise, Cavell's refusal to regard this problem as solved, his determination to *keep* it outstanding, is highly significant of his work. It is in a way equivalent to Schönberg's insistence to keep outstanding the problem of composition through the span of his career as a composer. The invocation of Schönberg, an exemplary figure which Cavell hardly could have failed to know from his musical studies under Bloch, is not accidental. Because if we take into account the Schönbergian high-modernist notion that the questions of art must be posed in terms of the most "advanced" artistic techniques of the age, we can formulate my approach to Cavell in the following way. Cavell saw in his early days the ordinary language "methods" (or rather *modes*) of Austin and Wittgenstein as the most "advanced" philosophical "techniques" of the day. Hence on the modernist model, the question of whether philosophy could be continued had to be, at *that* historical juncture, framed in terms of ordinary language philosophy. I.e. the question whether philosophy could

be *continued* had to be framed in terms of the problem of assessing the validity of, and redeeming the promise of, ordinary language philosophy.

The reason that I belabor the aesthetical and modernist inheritance Cavell brought to the study of ordinary language philosophy, is that I think the reception of Cavell may all too easily come off on a fundamentally wrong note due to the tendency – entrenched not the least by Stephen Mulhall’s seminal work *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary* – to place Cavell excessively close to the fairly standard context of doing ordinary language philosophy defined by the line from Norman Malcolm/Roger Albritton to Gordon Baker/P. M. S. Hacker.⁶ I regard this strategy of interpretation as constituting an oversimplification, and one that fails to take account of the dialectical and stylistic subtlety of Cavell’s work. In contrast, the interpretation of Cavell I want to suggest in this chapter, is that Cavell idiosyncratically treats ordinary language philosophy not as the key to the dissolution of the problems of metaphysics, but as the key to their *transformation*. The essence of Cavell’s modernist transformation of metaphysics, I will argue, is a reorientation of the concerns of metaphysics towards that world which we speak about in ordinary language, the immanent world of our “forms of life”, the *everyday* world. Or simply: The *human* world. Thus the basic OLP orthodoxy I see Cavell as wishing to avoid is the idea that the project of the “grammatical” analysis of ordinary language has somehow nullified the philosophical accomplishments of the past – paradigmatically the works of metaphysics – and the human concerns that they embody. In a word, I think Cavell finds such a dismissal *dogmatic*.

Is ordinary language philosophy dogmatic?

To be sure, it is hard to see how some kind of dismissal of the “tradition” in the name of OLP should *not* have taken hold, considering Wittgenstein’s proclamations to the effect that words are to be liberated from metaphysics and returned to the realm of ordinary use, and his intimations that metaphysical language can be likened to some kind of disease, in effect (at least apparently) using “metaphysics” as a term of disparagement in much the same way as the logical positivists did. A strong current critic of this “reductionist” line of Wittgensteinian thought is Stanley Rosen, who contends in *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary* that “For

⁶ S. Affeldt has highlighted this in his criticism of Mulhall in the *European Journal*; cf. Affeldt, 1998. ‘The Ground of Mutuality: Criteria, Judgement, and Intelligibility in Stephen Mulhall and Stanley Cavell’ in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6:1 and Mulhall, 1998. ‘The Givenness of Grammar: A Reply to Steven Affeldt’ also in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6:1. We shall discuss the matters at stake further on.

Wittgenstein, ordinary language *replaces* philosophy” [Rosen 02: 158, my italic]. However, what one tends to forget, whether one is for them or against them, is that these pronouncements constitute only *one* strand of everything Wittgenstein said and wrote. After all, Wittgenstein also insisted that “To convince someone of the truth, it is not enough to state it, but rather one must find the *path* from error to truth” and that “One must start out with error and convert it into truth.” [Wittgenstein 99: 119] In a similar vein John Wisdom noted in a recollection how Wittgenstein was not satisfied before his interlocutor had really *felt* the problem under discussion, even if Wittgenstein contended that the question itself was ultimately misguided or at least inadequately stated [Wisdom 52: 2].

In other words, the temptation of orthodoxy (Wittgensteinian or otherwise) is the temptation of simplification: To skip over the “path” and proceed directly to the “truth,” disregarding that it is the movement itself – the movement of inquiry – that is “philosophy”; philosophy being in the sense of Plato an *act*. What makes the orthodoxy orthodox, is that it betrays philosophy by fastening upon isolated assertions in a simplistic manner, elevating them to universal principles or mechanical methods. Or, what makes the orthodoxy orthodox is that it takes a thought in *dialectical motion* and transfixes it as a monolithic figure. In short, the Wittgensteinian orthodoxy tends, in stark contrast to Wittgenstein’s own example, to *reify* the insights of ordinary language philosophy, turning them into an “official” doctrine. To give a sense of how this official doctrine had entrenched itself in its heyday, and the feeling of oppression it generated among dissenters, I offer the following quotation from R. H. Schlagel’s essay ‘Contra Wittgenstein’ (1974):

‘There is a doctrine about the nature and function of philosophy which is so prevalent among Anglo-American philosophers today that it deserves to be described as the official theory. This official doctrine, which derives mainly from the later writings of Wittgenstein, goes something like this.’ Most (if not all) philosophical problems are not genuine problems ... but arise because philosophers misuse ordinary forms of speech or place a strange interpretation on common linguistic uses which results in a distorted way of construing things ... *Accordingly, the whole history of philosophy is “seen as” nothing more than linguistic muddles and pseudoproblems* arising because philosophers “do not command a clear view of the workings of language.” Philosophical problems are not problems to be *solved*, but problems to be *dissolved* by the analysis of ordinary language [Schlagel 74: 539, my italic]

The initial description within single quotation-marks, it should be noted, satirically mimic the opening of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, a classic of OLP, and arguably one of the more dogmatic, taking grammatical analysis to behaviorist extremes, branding almost all talk of the mental as "categorical" mistakes. Of course, when Ryle uses the term "official doctrine," he is referring to Cartesianism, which he finds "absurd." [Ryle 63: 17] What Schlagel is implying in his parody, is that OLP has become the new "official doctrine"; in other words, that Wittgensteinianism has, in terms of dominance, become the new Cartesianism. And this dominant doctrine, Schlagel alleges, tends to foster in its adherents a mentality that make them feel entitled to dismissing the great thinkers of the past. Yet to reduce the ideas of the great minds of the tradition, Schlagel charges:

...to the surreptitious influence of grammar on their thought as a result of misusing ordinary language is to present a caricature of traditional philosophy, an analysis which could come only from a philosopher whose philosophical orientation derived primarily from the narrow influences of the logical and meta-mathematical problems of Russell and Frege, and the subtle but myopic linguistic analyses of G. E. Moore. [Schlagel 74: 540]

Seen through this myopic lens, Schlagel continues, "the function of philosophy can only be to show how previous philosophers (or contemporary philosophers still doing traditional philosophy) were misled and trapped by their misuses of languages into thinking they actually were accomplishing something." [Schlagel 74: 548] However, this "official doctrine"-version of OLP, this philosophy of the linguistic commissar, I contend, with its disregard for the philosophical accomplishments of the past and the judgments of the individual, has never been representative for Cavell's views. To see that Cavell was sensitive to this feeling of oppression already in 'Must We Mean What We Say?' (1958), compare his recognition that:

That what we ordinarily say and mean may have a direct and deep control over what we can philosophically say and mean is an idea which many philosophers find oppressive. [Cavell 94:1]

In fact, this is the first sentence of the essay. And this essay being Cavell's debut as a public practitioner of OLP, I find it rather symptomatic that the first sentence of his first major essay

addresses the sense of oppression philosophers of other persuasions feels vis-à-vis OLP.⁷ It is hardly an orthodox or dogmatic start. On the contrary, despite – or rather because of – his great devotion to OLP as a fresh avenue of inquiry, Cavell has been exceedingly keen that it shall not be allowed to develop into doctrinarianism.

A proposed test

Having made these opening considerations, I hope that if we transport our minds back to the late fifties and the early sixties, we may be ready to entertain the following notion: That Cavell's defining task is to extricate what he regards as OLP's (largely unfulfilled) potential from the stifling orthodoxy. Looking back in 'The Politics of Interpretation' to the heyday of OLP, Cavell writes that it "would take considerable novelistic skill to recapture the mood of philosophical debate" at that juncture in intellectual history. [Cavell 88: 36] Still I deem it crucial that we do form *some* impression of the "mood" of that debate, for the reason that I think the contemporary reception of Cavell's early writings (and therefore of his work as a whole) may easily look in the wrong places due to a lack of appreciation of the context these texts are addressing. Thus in lieu of a novelistic presentation, I propose the following procedure in order to evoke the young Cavell's ambivalent position vis-à-vis OLP. We should locate a paradigmatic criticism against OLP that was current at the time of Cavell's formation as a philosopher, and try to form an impression, based on Cavell's writings in that period, of his response to that criticism. We should then be able to gather an idea whether Cavell reacts with a "straight" apology for the standard tenets of OLP, or whether he meets the criticism in a more ambivalent and dialectical fashion. (Which would be in the modernist vein.) I of course suggest that it is the latter that is the case.

As a candidate for the "devil's advocate" against OLP in the post-war period, I propose Ernest Gellner, the Czech anthropologist who wrote *Words and Things: An Examination of, and an Attack on, Linguistic Philosophy*, what Cavell called, and not in a laudatory sense, "a sensational book."⁸ [Cavell 94: 112] Gellner's basic allegation was that "linguistic philosophy" was (1) lost in trivial grammatical considerations, and thereby (2) in effect acting as an ideological prop for the socio-political *status quo*. In other words, Gellner found OLP to

⁷ For an autobiographical rendering of that debut, which also sheds some light on the historical context we are addressing, see Cavell's 'Counter-Philosophy and the Pawn of Voice' in *A Pitch of Philosophy*. [Cavell 96a: 55-6]

⁸ Some of the sensation derived from Ryle's refusal to have it reviewed in *Mind*.

be, apart from intellectually empty, socially conservative in its appeal to the given norms of language and culture. I.e. what I take Gellner to be actually saying, was that orthodox OLP had fallen prey to what Wilfrid Sellars has called “the myth of the given.”⁹ Or, to be entirely precise, Gellner is claiming that OLP is committing what he calls a generalized version of the *naturalistic fallacy*. In Gellner’s view, OLP is prone to appeal to given linguistic facts as if they were analogous to facts of *nature*. Namely, in Chapter II, Section 3 of *Words and Things* Gellner writes that OLP is in the

...habit of inferring the answer to normative, evaluative problems from the actual use of words. This has been called *the generalized version of the Naturalistic Fallacy*. [Gellner 79: 51]

While imprecise, this is not necessarily an inept observation. It puts on notice many facile conceptions of OLP, conceptions that are not necessarily examples of OLP at its finest, but that nevertheless are regrettably part of the OLP scene (its “mood”), and a hallmark of OLP’s more epigonal practitioners. In hindsight one might say that *Words and Things* could (or should) at least have served as a useful warning against what *could* go wrong with OLP. As I will discuss below, Gellner’s onslaught can be said to anticipate or parallel some valid criticism of OLP – including Cavell’s own internal “critique” of it. Unfortunately, what was particularly offensive in Gellner’s charge, was its sweeping, rather satirical formulation, with a heavy emphasis on sociological considerations. Because of this Gellner’s criticism is controversial to say the least. It is so controversial that even referring to it might be considered controversial. The only reason that I presume to do so is that Cavell explicitly discusses Gellner in an important essay (‘Austin at Criticism’), and implicitly in another (‘The Politics of Interpretation,’ looking back to the former.) And the response of Cavell to Gellner is a surprising one. In fact, in that response Cavell dialectically appropriates Gellner’s terms of criticism into his own conception of OLP. This is done, specifically, by Cavell using Gellner’s charge as an opportunity to insinuate into his own “politics of interpretation” the tenets of what is called, in critical theory, “redemptive reading”.

I think this connection between Cavell and the tradition of critical theory is worth noting. Because however distasteful to many, we should appreciate the fact that Gellner was not alone in his criticism; his voice had a significant echo from the other side of the Anglo-

⁹ See ‘Empiricism and the philosophy of mind.’ [Sellars 68]

Saxon/Continental divide. Namely, finding the appeal to “ordinary” language sinister, echoing populist prejudices, Herbert Marcuse charges in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) that

Throughout the work of the linguistic analysis, there is the familiarity with the chap on the street whose talk plays such a leading role in linguistic philosophy. The chumminess of speech is essential inasmuch as it excludes from the beginning the high-brow vocabulary of “metaphysics”; it militates against intelligent non-conformity; it ridicules the egghead. The language [of OLP] is the language which the man on the street actually speaks; it is the language which expresses his behaviour; it is therefore the token of concreteness. However, it is also the token of a false concreteness. The language which provides most of the material for the analysis is a purged language, purged not only of its ‘unorthodox’ vocabulary, but also of the means for expressing any other contents than those furnished to the individuals by their society. [Marcuse 02: 178]

Thus, as Espen Hammer remarks about this line of criticism:

According to a widespread preconception, especially among philosophers in the Continental tradition, ordinary language philosophy, with its emphasis on what we ordinarily say and mean, is essentially expressive of a positivist attitude. On Herbert Marcuse’s interpretation, which was instrumental in spreading this view, the appeal to the ordinary in these philosophers’ writings is simply ideological: while failing to realize the constructed character of the social world, it views the social as a realm of brute “facts” before which critical thinking inevitably must halt. [Hammer 02: 2]

This indicates that beyond Gellner, OLP at the time of Cavell’s introduction to it was facing significant criticism, often with a socio-political inflection, not the least from followers of Freudo-Marxist critical theory. Hence: if I am right about the way Cavell tackles Gellner by invoking the notion of “redemptive reading” as a “politics of interpretation”, Cavell’s response to Gellner simultaneously constitutes a response to a Marcuse-like charge (i.e. an attack from critical theory); one that in effect *reconciles* or at least attempts to reconcile the agendas of OLP and critical theory. Thus Gellner’s charge, for all its “vulgarity” (Cavell’s word [94: 113]) serves a triple purpose in my narrative:

(1) It indicates a certain type of criticism against OLP prevalent in Cavell’s formative period, as well as a general intellectual “tone” or “mood” of the period.

(2) Cavell's response to Gellner indicates how Cavell absorbs trends foreign to OLP – even trends *hostile* to OLP – into his own conception of OLP, performing what I will portray as a *dialectical maneuver* of “Aufhebung,” which simultaneously facilitates the overcoming of what Cavell sees as “dogmatic” traits of OLP.

(3) It specifically aligns Cavell's unorthodox appropriation of OLP with the tenets of radical thought, and thus also with the “eschatological” perspectives underpinning that criticism, archetypically represented by the Freudo-Marxist theology of Ernst Bloch in *Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*.

**Distancing the orthodoxy:
The significance of the “tone” of Cavell's writing
Philosophical styles and personas**

To appreciate these connections, let us portray them in their natural *milieu*, so to speak; let us for a moment pause by the notion of a certain “tone” or “mood” surrounding OLP in the late fifties and early sixties, not to say of a general tone and mood of that era. (An era that did not only comprise Austin and Wittgenstein, but also Marcuse and Schönberg, *especially* at Cavell's Berkeley.) I take this atmospheric element to be of importance in assessing the nature and significance of Cavell's *style* of writing, i.e. both its structural composition, as well as the tone(s) of voice he is employing. Judging from the angry and suspicious interventions of a Gellner or Marcuse, which we have just touched on, the tone surrounding OLP at the time in question is the tone of *antagonism*, of *ideological struggle*, and above all of impending *crisis*. Those tones, tones that creep into the work of Cavell, suggest the schismatic climate of a “liminal” phase, of something about to burst, of reform or rebellion, a tone of what Cavell describes (speaking about Wittgenstein's philosophical *persona*) as moral urgency. The reason that I am trying to evoke a sense of this mood is that I want to convey an idea of ordinary language philosophy, at the time of Cavell's initiation into its ranks as a publishing professional, as ripe for a radical, internal criticism, like, say, “serious” music was ripe for a radical internal criticism at the time of Schönberg, or in an even broader perspective, like Catholicism was ripe for a radical internal criticism at the time of Luther. In other words, I am trying to convey the idea of OLP around 1960 as ready for the appearance of a *reformer*. And that reformer, I maintain, was Stanley Cavell. Thus one might say I am doing in my own

small way for Cavell what Janik and Toulmin did for Wittgenstein in *Wittgenstein's Vienna*; to situate my man within a cultural climate that makes him look like a plausible candidate for the role of someone who picks up the tensions of his day and brings them to (perhaps paradoxical) expression.

Incidentally, this is exactly what Cavell aims to do for *Austin*, “the implacable professor,” in ‘Austin at Criticism,’ attempting to reconcile the image of Austin-the-academic with the image of Austin-the-revolutionary. The composite image Cavell arrives at is that of a “teacher”, or one might say, the image of a “rabbi”. As Cavell recalls:

[Austin] once said to me... “I had to decide early on whether I was going to write books or to teach people how to do philosophy usefully.” Why he found this choice necessary may not be clear. But it is as clear as a clear Berkeley day that he was above all a teacher, as is shown not merely in any such choice, but in everything he wrote and (in my hearing) spoke, with its didactic directions for profitable study, its lists of exercises, its liking for sound preparation and its disapproval of sloppy work and lazy efforts. In example and precept, his work is complete, in a measure hard to imagine matched. I do not see that it is anywhere being followed with the completeness it describes and exemplifies. There must be, if this is so, various reasons for it. *And it would be something of an irony if it turned out that Wittgenstein's manner were easier to imitate than Austin's; in its way, something of a triumph for the implacable professor.* [Cavell 94: 113, my italic]

In terms of spiritual archetypes, Cavell portrays Austin as playing the “rabbi” to Wittgenstein’s “sage.” And in continuation of that – somewhat romantic(ist) – logic of spiritual ideal-types, I am portraying Cavell as a Luther (a “reformer”) of ordinary language philosophy, i.e. as one instigating a revolt from within the hierarchy itself and based on the canonical scripture itself. Thus Cavell, like Luther, bases his revolutionary bid not on a claim of bringing a *new* truth, but rather on a claim of restating the old truths, just in a way unobscured by dogmatism. The interesting question is then – as with Luther – what causes of discontent Cavell was responding to. Correspondingly, I portray Cavell as apprehending and responding not primarily to an *external* threat to OLP, but to the *internal* danger that the orthodoxy of OLP posed to the cause of OLP itself. Hence, in a similar manner as the young Luther found that some of the orthodoxies of the Church posed a threat to the Church itself, the young Cavell was ultimately in the business of issuing a warning against the failings of orthodox OLP aimed at his fellow ordinary language philosophers, his “brothers in the faith”

as it were.¹⁰ Indeed, in the following I will argue that despite Cavell's sarcasm in dealing with Gellner, in the reaction to – and not the least in his anticipation or paralleling of – the type of criticism put forward in *Words and Things*, Cavell emerges as an essentially *ambivalent* defender of OLP. Thus we could peg Cavell as another spiritual type: The doubter. Ambivalence, wanderings in the wilderness, followed by sudden conversions, sudden illuminations, sudden reassurances, is a staple of religious (and romanticist) lore; to put it with Heidegger, “formal” elements of the phenomenology of the religious life.¹¹ Thus, at the one hand, Cavell to some extent appears (in various writings) to condone the kind of criticism leveled at OLP by Gellner, and at the other hand, he comes across as strenuously trying to explain (to himself as much as to anybody else) why this line of criticism is nevertheless ultimately misguided. That is, Cavell seems both to resonate somewhat to the idea that OLP is in danger of turning into a self-centered orthodoxy, out of touch with *the real issues of life*, not the least in its off-hand rejection of traditional philosophy, *and* to be at great pains to explain that there exists another, freer, more *genuine* (say authentic) OLP, the one that Austin and Wittgenstein *really* practiced. In my interpretation, it is from this double bind that Cavell's mature work emerges, with its characteristic dialectical, idiosyncratic and stylistically complex way of approaching philosophical problems (and the problem of philosophy), one that inherits *both* the tradition (metaphysics) and the criticism of the tradition (OLP.)

A closer look at the case of Gellner

The alleged esotericness of OLP

In order to clarify what this means we must go back to 1959, when Gellner chastised what he called Linguistic Philosophy for having (1) lost itself in abstruse discussions of grammatical nuances – squabbles about “mere words” – at the expense of the traditional philosophical problems pertaining to the substance of human existence, and thus in the process had (2)

¹⁰ There are other interesting parallels of course. Such as that Luther trained as a jurist before he became a theologian, jurists being the closest thing to ordinary language philosophers in the Scholastic universe, investigating “how to do things with words.” And needless to say, Luther is a significant role-model in his rendering of religious discourse in “ordinary” language, as well as stressing the religious importance of the “everyday” life, as opposed to that of rites and festivals.

¹¹ Cf. [Heidegger 04]. See also *Heidegger's Religious Origins*. [Crowe 06] For a discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophical-literary style in the context of such “confessional”, religious-romantic models, see R. Eldridge's *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism*. [Eldridge 97]

become a stooge of political reaction. Writes Gellner, dismissing OLP's claim to real-world importance:

The argument is often put in the form that, when we have cleared up the verbal misunderstandings, we shall be better equipped to proceed with the real problems (if any). ... These protestations of modesty, the proclamations ... should not be taken at their face value. For one thing, the insistence on the thoroughness and minuteness of the preliminary study of usage makes it very, very unlikely that the subsequent stage of doing something else will ever be reached. [Gellner 79: 278]

Complaining that linguistic philosophy was appealing to what Sellars might have characterized as a variation of "the myth of the given," what Gellner dubbed *the generalized naturalistic fallacy*, Gellner issued a complaint that OLP in effect recognized no norm of rationality transcending the linguistically givens of a culture. Though Gellner's criticism was rejected, not to say ridiculed, by a large section of the professional philosophical community of the time, the charges still somehow struck a chord. Today Gellner's opinions about the faults of OLP would hardly have provoked such condemnation, simply because they have become rather commonplace. Indeed, if one is looking for a current expression of a similar criticism, and from a more philosophically respectable source, one need look no further than to Stanley Rosen's *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary*, Chapter 4. Here Rosen writes in a tone only slightly more forgiving than that of Gellner, that

By rejecting nature in the sense of *phusis*, that is to say, of an order external to human linguistic invention, Wittgenstein is left with *nomos* or custom. His analysis of the "ordinary" use of language is thus endless; it has no beginning and no end. Otherwise stated, it has no bottom and no top. There is no "theory" of correct linguistic use ... We cannot "intellectually perceive" something about human nature or experience that is regulative of discursive practice, nor can we construct a unique and comprehensive conceptual framework for the rank-ordering of this practice. Ordinary language is ordinal only in a local or historical sense. [Rosen 02: 141]

We should note that Rosen, like Gellner, in effect argues that OLP has fallen prey to the myth of the given, or equivalently, to the generalized version of the Naturalistic Fallacy. Hence Rosen and Gellner are both saying that OLP appeal in an authoritarian manner to the *social facts* (language as it is practiced here and now), exactly what Marcuse finds ideological in OLP, namely what he sees as a veiled apology for the political *status quo*. Gellner, Marcuse and Rosen are all charging OLP with, so to speak, an excessive naturalizing of "second

nature,” something Rosen finds substantiated by Wittgenstein’s professed self-understanding that he is doing a kind of “natural history” of language. In other words, both Gellner and Rosen intimate that OLP has abandoned the strong claim on behalf of reason (or even Reason) traditionally inherent in *metaphysics*, a claim of reason that, they think, underwrites the claims of progressive ethics and politics, that is, the claims of *freedom*. I.e. Gellner and Rosen, like Marcuse, are saying that OLP has become so fixated on the “immanent” socio-linguistic realm that they have sold out all ideas of *transcendence* that have been the guiding light of morality and rationality through 2500 years of Western Tradition.¹² Thus what Gellner was presenting in 1959 was hardly *merely* a slanderous attack without any intellectual credentials. However uncouth, Gellner’s line of criticism should not be violently rebuked or just shrugged off by anyone who cares about OLP. Rather, even if satirical or overblown it should be seen as providing a touchstone of what OLP ought to endeavor *not* to become. (Namely a parody of itself.) Perhaps Gellner *was* a fool, but as Shakespeare has pointed out, fools sometimes in their “vulgar” way tell the truth that others cannot speak. Yet many practitioners of OLP remained in their “dogmatic slumbers” despite such warnings, a reaction of avoidance establishing by default *Words and Things* as a beacon of resistance for disaffected souls outside the community of OLP. And to be sure, OLP *did* in the end become largely discredited in the philosophical community, not to say in the cultural field. On this score, Bertrand Russell’s assessment in the foreword to *Words and Things* proved prescient, though perhaps not entirely for the reasons that he himself had expected:

Mr. Gellner’s book *Words and Things* deserves the gratitude of all who cannot accept the linguistic philosophy now in vogue at Oxford. It is difficult to guess how much immediate effect the book is likely to have; the power of fashion is great, and even the most cogent arguments fail to convince if they are not in line with the trend of current opinion. But, whatever may be the first reaction to Mr. Gellner’s arguments, it seems highly probable – to me, at least – that they will gradually be accorded their due weight. [Gellner 79: xiii]

Whether Gellner’s arguments have ultimately been accorded their due weight, or rather excessive weight, is a matter of judgment. At any rate, the decline of OLP has obviously had more to do with other causes than this single attack. But if nothing else, at least Gellner’s book stands as a monument to the wane of OLP, and this is what makes it useful as a point of

¹² For a thoughtful assessment of the larger socio-political issues involved in Gellner’s criticism, cf. ‘Is Ordinary Language Analysis Conservative?’ by Alan Wertheimer, *Political Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 4. (Nov., 1976), pp. 405-422.

reference for gauging Cavell's ambivalence towards the strong, but controversial school of thought which he found himself contributing to as a fledgling professional. Let us therefore take stock of Gellner's charge and Cavell's response to it in 'Austin at Criticism.'

The fact that Gellner was an anthropologist is not accidental to the message of *Words and Things*. Gellner argued that in effect linguistic philosophers formed a tribe; an extremely well-bred one, primarily inhabiting the British upper-class universities such as Oxford. Invoking the life-style sociology of Veblen (substituting Conspicuous Triviality for Conspicuous Consumption), and foreshadowing Bordieu's examination of the *habitus* of academic life, Gellner sketches an outline of what he sees as the tribal cult of OLP:

By a stroke of genius, it has invented a philosophy for gentlemen and, at the same time, found a home for professional philosophy, sore pressed for a field by the recession of faith in the transcendent realm and the conquest by science of the immanent world. Professional philosophy was like a tribe on the march in search of new pastures, having lost the old. It has found, or invented, a realm eminently suited to gentlemanly pursuits and to the provision of a home for an untechnical, yet ethereal and esoteric, profession. And this realm is at the same time inaccessible to science because it is idiosyncratic; it is neither committed to transcendentalism nor yet necessarily hostile to established customary forms of it: it is the realm of the diversified, essentially *sui generis* habits of words too human to admit of any technique, too formal and (allegedly) neutral to be of vulgar practical relevance or to be classed as subversive, too diversified to allow general ideas. [Gellner 79: 273]

Perhaps better than a tribe, the ordinary-language philosophers of the Anglo-Saxon post-war era might, on Gellner's logic, be considered to constitute a *church*, a church bound together by a shared "orthodoxy." And this is exactly the kind of ecclesiastical nomenclature that Gellner uses to describe the Wittgensteinian "movement", which he deems a substitute for established religion:

Linguistic Philosophy, on the other hand, is an excellent secular substitute for an Established Religion. It has its vision – in the background. Its practical implications are a careful but pliable conceptual conservatism, a strong distrust of intellectual innovation, a disregard of general consistency ... It provides something, the exegesis of which can become the content of teaching: the exegesis of common sense or of the contents of the Oxford English Dictionary, which replaces exegesis of a Creed or of the classics; a respect for a linguistic tradition which replaces respect for a Revealed one. [Gellner 79: 271]

Here it is being suggested that the movement of OLP intrinsically appeals to *insiders*, people who have grasped the “jargon.”¹³ In short, Gellner is alleging that OLP is *esoteric*. Now, whether fair or foul, what *did* Cavell have to say to this charge in ‘Austin at Criticism’?

Cavell’s reply to Gellner

Virtues of the mask

In essence, Cavell takes Gellner to attempt to “unmask” – in the style of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – ordinary language philosophy’s claim to knowledge as a mere front for self-interest and the will to power. In other words, Gellner’s painting of OLP as ultimately a pseudo-religion (with its popes and priests, sages and ascetics, scriptures and dogma) is instrumental in bringing to bear the same kind of criticism against OLP as had been ideal-typically brought to bear on “established” religion by Nietzsche, Freud and Marx. Specifically, Cavell takes it that Gellner is dramatizing his “demystification” of OLP as an unmasking of the *oracular pose* affected by Wittgenstein and imitated by his followers; the pose or mask or persona of someone who possesses exemplary authority about “what to say when” (what makes sense or not), an authority that does not need to be explained or justified beyond the manners of the pose (i.e. “this is what I do”.) Thus as Cavell says, Gellner is out to expose

...Wittgenstein’s strategies of the sage and the ascetic (which Nietzsche isolated as the traditional mask of the Knower; that is, as the only form in which it could carry authority.) [Cavell 94: 112]

The surprising feature of how Cavell responds to this is how he does *not* respond. He does *not* respond with what could be called the “standard” defense against the claim that OLP-practitioners pose as having some “oracular” knowledge of language that makes their grammatical judgment the “last word” on a philosophical controversy. In other words Cavell does *not* quote the following passage from Austin which has become fairly routine to quote in such situations:

Certainly ordinary language has no claim to be the last word, if there is such a thing. It embodies, indeed, something better than the

¹³ Compare Adorno’s notion of a “jargon of authenticity”.

metaphysics of the Stone Age, namely, as was said, the inherited experience and acumen of many generations of men. But then, that acumen has been concentrated primarily upon the practical business of life [and so] this is likely enough not to be the best way of arranging things if our interests are more extensive or intellectual than the ordinary. ... And it must be added too, that superstition and error and fantasy of all kinds do become incorporated in ordinary language and even sometimes stand up to the survival test (only, when they do, why should we not detect it?). Certainly, then, ordinary language is not the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, *it is the first word*. [Austin 61: 133, my italic]

Cavell *has* indeed invoked this passage earlier in the essay but only to dismiss it with the contention that Austin's "repeated disclaimer that ordinary language is certainly not the last word, only it is the *first* word' ... is reassuring only during polemical enthusiasm. For the issue is why the first, or *any*, word can have the kind of power Austin attributes to it. I share his sense that it has, but I cannot see that he has anywhere tried to describe the sources or domain of that power." [Cavell 94: 102] To voluntarily forgo this classical defense is perhaps the most unorthodox move any defender of OLP can perform, for the simple reason that this is as it were the common-sense defense. But this is only the beginning. Because not only does Cavell forgo this classical defense, he goes on to, in the face of Gellner's charge that the OLP-practitioner is wearing a mask, to *not* deny that a mask is being worn. To the contrary, Cavell embraces the idea that there is mask-wearing and posing involved in OLP, as well as problematic claims to authority; essentially so, Cavell acknowledges. Thus instead of denying anything, Cavell recognizes that to assume a pose of authority is part of doing OLP, even if it involves donning a "mask." Because, as Cavell explains

Far from a condemnation, this is said from a sense that in a modern age to speak the truth may require the protection of a pose, and even that the necessity to posture may be an authentic mark of the possession of truth. It may not, too; that goes without saying. And it always is dangerous, and perhaps self-destructive. But to the extent it is necessary, it is not the adoption of pose which is to be condemned, but the age which makes it necessary. (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, with terrible consciousness, condemned both themselves and the age for their necessities; and both maintained, at great cost, the doubt that their poses were really necessary—which is what it must feel like to know your pose.) [Cavell 94: 112]

The above is not only a remarkable passage in it self, it is a very strong pointer ahead to the problematic that will culminate in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, namely the

problematic of claiming authority, ultimately not only in OLP, but in human affairs as such, which also includes politics. What is in the making in ‘Austin at Criticism,’ in other words, is Cavell’s hallmark problematic of what it means to claim to *speak on behalf of others*, to speak on behalf of “us” and “we,” to “arrogate” one’s voice in a community, and thus to *test* the cohesion (i.e. the reality) of that very community. Which is a similar claim to speak *exemplarily* that Kant discusses in relation to aesthetic judgment in his third Critique, under the regulative ideal of agreement in judgment.¹⁴ And this in turn brings us to the comparison of art-criticism and OLP which accounts for the “Criticism” in ‘Austin at Criticism.’ As Cavell remarks:

The positive purpose in Austin’s [grammatical] distinctions resembles the art critic’s purpose in comparing and distinguishing works of art, namely, that in this crosslight the capacities and salience of an individual object in question are brought to attention and focus.
[Cavell 94: 103]

In other words, to assume the position of a critic (whether of art or language or society) *is* to strike a pose of authority; it *is* to presume to tell people where to look and what to look for; in other words, to presume the right, not to say duty, to *instruct* them. It is *necessary* to do this, Cavell indicates, to arrogate that authority (even if it entails putting on a mask), in order for there to be any serious conversation at all. To be a critic, and a fortiori, to be a practitioner of OLP means, in short, to strike the pose of *exemplarity*, something that will always prove problematic, and always draw protest and attract suspicion. Because there is no (on Cavell’s view) *a priori* or apodictic way to establish that authority; it can only be established in the act of judging, and in the reception of that judgment by one’s peers. Thus only time can tell – and further conversation and demonstration and pondering – if one’s claim to authority was justified after all; if one is able to successfully establish one’s judgment as exemplary, i.e. if others come to see as you see, hear what you hear. Hence the critic may *have* to, from time to time, resort to “resting on the spade” (to use Cavell’s favorite image from the PU), maintaining – patiently, not arrogantly – “this is what I do,” waiting for others to come around to his or her point of view, or to come up with another. Hence Cavell’s whole interpretation on the PU, and of OLP, as foreshadowed by ‘Austin at Criticism’, is summed up in his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s *patience*, his manner of waiting. Namely, this waiting is interpreted, on the model of Kant, as an affirmation of the regulative ideal of spontaneous (i.e.

¹⁴ Cf. E. Friedlander’s ‘On examples, representatives, measures, standards, and the ideal’ in *Reading Cavell*, edited by Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh. [Crary 06]

unforced) *agreement in judgment*. Hence on Cavell's reading the Wittgensteinian character is resting on his spade, waiting for agreement to *emerge*. That is, this gesture of patient waiting is deeply significant to Cavell. Because in his interpretation the hope or ideal that guides this waiting for agreement – or harmony, reconciliation, peace – to emerge without coercion (spontaneously), is nothing short of *utopian*: it is a vision of uncompromised relations among humans, not in a world out of the ordinary, but in an ordinary world *redeemed*.

To return to the concrete circumstances of Cavell's answer to Gellner: The crucial thing that Gellner fails to appreciate is the *reason* for Austin and Wittgenstein to speak through "masks": It is dictated by the utopian nature of their vision. What they have to say *must* in a sense remain "esoteric" to the one's that are too "dogmatic" or "skeptical" to get their point. (In religious terminology: Those of little faith, in thrall to false idols.) As long as they avert their eyes to this insight no-one can *force* them to appreciate it – that would go against the essence of the insight itself. Hence there *is* some truth to Gellner's assessment that OLP has an "esoteric" element, and that Austin and Wittgenstein affect the "poses" of, say, a rabbi and a sage; where Gellner fails utterly, is in properly assessing the meaning and nature of those poses. That, in a nutshell, is Cavell's rejoinder to Gellner's *Words and Things*. What Cavell disagrees with is not so much Gellner's description of OLP as a quasi-religious phenomenon (in the sense that Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is a quasi-religious phenomenon, affecting a "prophetic" voice); what he disagrees with is Gellner's philistine policy of interpretation in regard to it.

Redemptive reading

Utopianism and OLP conjoined

Connection to critical theory

To my mind, what Cavell does in his response to Gellner is crucial to everything that follows in his career. Cavell has sacrificed the "standard" defense of OLP in order to make a much less orthodox, far more ambitious – and far more oblique – attempt at making sense of the legacy of Austin and Wittgenstein in terms of the *utopian ideal of spontaneous agreement in judgment*. Because now the issue is not what we can *prove* on the basis of ordinary language; the issue is what hopes and ideals implicitly inform our use of language – namely the vision that we shall come to harmonious agreement, spontaneously, without force or compromise.

This shift into what is in effect a “utopian” mode of thought (as opposed to a “technical” analysis of the givens of ordinary language) implies that Cavell elects to confront the allegations of Gellner on their own ground, the ground of a critique of ideology, rather than on the conventional ground of OLP. Because now Cavell can ask what *prejudices*, what false idols, block the understanding of what he interprets as Austin and Wittgenstein’s “true” utopian agenda. Indeed, Cavell, finding that Gellner’s posture of suspicion is “common enough,” asserts that Gellner’s attempt at unmasking itself needs to be unmasked. [Cavell 94: 113] What is crucial in the argument that ensues, is that Cavell contends that a fruitful project of unmasking hinges on the unmasker’s understanding of the *value and meaning* of what he unmasks. In other words, to unmask something, according to Cavell, means at the same time to *evaluate* it, or if you will, interpret it with a certain charity. Thus the politics of unmasking becomes a politics of interpretation. And the ability to unmask *well* – profitably, fruitfully, not simply gratuitously – by implication requires the ability to *interpret* well. People who lack that ability should be careful about what they condemn, and on what grounds. Thus to read with suspicion is no excuse to read badly. “The relation of unmasking to evaluation is always delicate to trace” Cavell writes, and continues:

Gellner vulgarly imagines that his sociological reduction in itself proves the intellectual inconsequence and social irrelevance or political conservatism of English philosophy. ... Grant for the argument that his analysis of this philosophy as a function of the Oxford and Cambridge tutorial system, the conventions of Oxford conversation, the distrust of ideology, the training in classics and its companion ignorance of science, and so forth, is accurate and relevant enough. Such an analysis would at most show the conditions or outline the limitations—one could say it makes explicit the conventions—within which this work was produced or initiated. To touch the question of its value, the value of those conventions themselves, as they enter the texture of the work, would have to be established. This is something that Marx and Nietzsche and Freud, our teachers of unmasking, knew better than their progeny. [Cavell 94: 113]

Thus for instance Nietzsche had, as Cavell points out, an excellent understanding of the power of the tradition that he was attempting to unmask; say the tradition of Christianity. Hence if Gellner’s project of unmasking OLP should have had any lasting value, it would have had to incorporate an understanding of the value of the thing that it purported to unmask, namely OLP; an understanding which Gellner’s work according to Cavell does *not* incorporate.

However, as we have suggested, Cavell's response does not come out of the blue; it essentially rehearses the relation between unmasking and valuing that is drawn up by Ernst Bloch in *The Principle of Hope*. The notable feature of Bloch's version of ideological critique is that he essentially advocates the practice of *redemptive reading*, maintaining that even in "ideological" expressions there is an element of "truth" to be found. (And that truth is hope.) Bloch's hermeneutical point being that we must be ready to recognize the truth in what Cavell calls "foul disguise." I.e. we must not be blind to a truth merely because it has been distorted at the hands of a party we tend to disagree with. To the contrary; if the "truth" (or in Luther's locution "faith") has been "taken captive" in our day, it is all the more imperative to redeem it. Hence even our ideological adversary may possess an element of truth, a glimpse which we should strive to recover and restore through the process of interpretation. "Particularly", that is, as Bloch stresses, "if he has stolen it, if the soiled object was once in better hands." [Mendieta 05: 21] Bloch describes this redemptive reading as a looking for "red arrows" in the history of culture that point in the direction of utopian visions. Thus Cavell's strategy of embracing rather than rejecting Gellner's attribution of mask-wearing to the practice of OLP is in harmony with Bloch's own "politics of interpretation". Cavell is looking for the "red arrows" in Austin and Wittgenstein's philosophical styles and personas, as well as in Gellner's misreading of them (which may itself have a "truth-content", despite itself), that point towards utopian hopes that can, in a sense, only be expressed in an "esoteric" manner. Hence on *this* politics of interpretation, OLP as a whole becomes neither more nor less than a veiled articulation of the utopian ideal of reconciliation through spontaneous agreement in judgment.

Cavell's defense against Gellner *is* therefore to charitably interpret the "poses" or "masks" or "personas" affected by Austin and Wittgenstein – like the Shakespearean fool's mask – as ways of expressing visions that might not, under current circumstances, be articulated otherwise. That is, rather than denying that Austin and Wittgenstein resorted to mask-wearing, Cavell sets out to identify those masks, and to interpret their utopian meaning, which is the hope of a spontaneous *harmony* of judgment. This "politics of interpretation" forms the basis of what I see as Cavell's *dialectical* mode of doing philosophy, on several levels: (1) The discussion of the presence and meaning of masks points towards Cavell's mature reading of the PU as a "drama" playing out between various voices, or equivalently, a drama where Wittgenstein speaks through various "masks." Even more importantly, (2) as we shall see the discussion points towards Cavell's *own* essayistic mode of composing philosophical texts.

That is, (3) in the very *form* of Cavell's response to Gellner, we see an example of Cavell's stylistic manner of developing his "criss-crossing" lines of thought; that is, Cavell uses what I characterize as a "proxy" – in this case Gellner – or call it a "mask," in order to launch an internal criticism of OLP, the dialectical trick being that the *criticism* of OLP is bundled up with a *defense* of OLP, i.e. a retort to what the proxy is accusing OLP of. In other words, Cavell is utilizing Gellner's attack from *outside* OLP to set himself up *inside* OLP in the position of a reformer. The way Cavell then proceeds is to present his own point of view as an "Aufhebung" of two diametrically opposed claims or theses (in effect: dogmatism and skepticism, i.e. orthodox OLP and the skeptical challenge to it) expressive of *partial truths* pointing, like "red arrows", towards a unifying utopian vision.

To summarize, what Cavell has done to Gellner in 'Austin at Criticism' is that he has pressed Gellner to give up elements of his own notions to him. That is, Cavell has made Gellner's criticism of the dogmatic strains of OLP his own, thus neutralizing it. Cavell seizes on Gellner's suggestion that OLP is resorting to a quasi-esoteric use of masks and poses in lieu of "straight" arguments and turns it to his own advantage. In the process, Cavell has found a way to disarm the attack on OLP from critical theory by squarely incorporating some of its tenets (specifically the utopian politics of redemptive reading, and the ideal of spontaneous agreement) into his own version of OLP. The result is that he has come on the track of a more "open-ended" vision of ordinary language philosophy: One that focuses on the regulative ideal of a harmonious interplay of individual voices in unforced judgment. This tentatively removes the stigma of dogmatism from OLP, because ordinary language is no longer seen as the *ground* supporting and enforcing agreement in "what we say when"; rather our agreement in ordinary language, imperfect and partial as it is, is painted as something to be understood in relation to the "principle of hope." Namely, the hope of reconciliation. Thus the notion of "agreement" in language that Austin and Wittgenstein are appealing to, on Cavell's interpretation, must be understood as a utopian one rather than a dogmatic one. Utopian because it is imagined as *spontaneous*; no voice is subordinated to any other.

But this, one might say, is nothing but a "reading" of the traditional *metaphysical* ideal of the reconciliation of the *one and the many*, as preeminent in ancient Greek philosophy. Hence by bringing the concept of reconciliation back from its "metaphysical" exile in the "world of ideas" Cavell *has* in a sense brought it "home" to the everyday world. This, in *nuce*, would constitute Cavell's "redemptive" reading of Austin and Wittgenstein, one that interprets their

“masks” and “poses” as exoteric cover-ups for a more profound agenda, namely a vision of reconciliation that would otherwise be regarded as “metaphysical” in a bad sense. And that, indeed, is equivalent to a notion of redeeming the everyday world by making *it* the scene of what would formerly be regarded as a “metaphysical” vision. On this interpretation, Austin and Wittgenstein’s evasive resort to “indirect communication” (i.e. speaking through dialectical masks) could then be justified, or at least understood, on the grounds that the utopian vision embodied by OLP is too fragile and controversial to be spoken about directly in the current culture, philosophical or otherwise. Indeed, for the “truth” to *emerge* the dogmatic and skeptical *images* blocking the utopian vista must be broken down from within the “untruth” itself. Hence the need for dialectics.

Cavell’s call for a reformation of ordinary language philosophy

“...all our life should be baptism”

Cavell’s response to Gellner in ‘Austin at Criticism’ is pivotal in several ways, not the least in what it tells us about Cavell’s developing ideas about criticism, about modernity, and about relating to authority and tradition. I think that we can say that besides (1) foreshadowing Cavell’s later work on the arrogation of voice, as well as preparing (2) the dialogical reading of the PU, Cavell’s answer to Gellner (3) reveals Cavell’s attitude to the modernist gesture of “unmasking” or of “criticism,” namely that it (as Bloch held) entails a hermeneutical apprehension – in fact a hermeneutical *appropriation* – of what one is unmasking/criticizing. Hence (4) Cavell is revealing in ‘Austin at Criticism’ that in *his* understanding a modernist criticism of *any* tradition is tantamount to a reappropriation of the same tradition – but for his own (largely hidden or “esoteric”) purposes. This *is*, so to speak, his “politics of interpretation”. A fortiori, (5) Cavell paints OLP as in itself an example of such criticism (or unmasking) of the tradition; i.e. Cavell portrays OLP as not merely dissolving/unmasking the tradition, call it “metaphysics”, he sees OLP as a potential reappropriation of it, or equivalently, he sees OLP as an appropriation of the (utopian) potential of metaphysics, but now understood in “everyday” or immanent terms. Thus (6) what Cavell claims that Gellner (and therefore also Marcuse) has failed to grasp about OLP, is that OLP actually *is* a modernist project; hence Gellner’s attempt to unmask OLP as inherently uncritical, and by implication reactionary, is fundamentally misguided. However – and this is the crux – the irony is (8) that it is not only *Gellner* (and the critics acting on behalf of critical theory) that

fails to comprehend this modernist aspect of OLP; so does the orthodox *adherents* of OLP as well. Hence Cavell's rebuke of Gellner's criticism of OLP becomes, at the same time, a criticism of the orthodox perception of OLP. Meaning that, as I have noted, Cavell has employed the "voice" of Gellner as a "proxy" in launching the criticism he himself is harboring, and to set the sails of his own philosophical modernism.

In consequence, from Cavell's rejoinder to *Words and Things* in 'Austin at Criticism,' we can in principle infer (at least with the benefit of hindsight) the outlines of Cavell's own unorthodox appropriation of OLP, and beyond that, of the philosophical tradition at large, as well as, in a double-take of hermeneutical acrobatics, of the redemptive-utopian "politics of interpretation" associated with critical theory, for instance as practiced by Ernst Bloch. In an ironical gesture, Cavell uses Gellner's "misinterpretation" of OLP as an opportunity to edge in his alternative interpretation of OLP. This dialectical strategy of Cavell's will be examined in detail below, when we embark on the reading of three of his central texts. For the present we are content to note that even *if* Gellner's criticism of OLP is trivial, it has drawn a response from Cavell that is far from trivial. In short, Cavell's response to Gellner has emerged as paradigmatic for Cavell's whole philosophical "style". And, we might note, after the twenty-odd years that have intervened, that Cavell is still much of the same ambivalent mind as in 'Austin at Criticism' when he writes in 'The Politics of Interpretation,' looking back at that essay, apparently unable or unwilling to let go of the charges of obscurantism, that

...those of us who have claimed responsibility for ordinary language procedures, or profit from them, have not to my mind satisfactorily described their performance. I do not mean, it goes without saying, that someone cannot perform them without being able to describe their performance. But to the extent that these procedures are philosophically undescribed, or underdescribed, *ordinary language philosophy remains an esoteric practice*. [Cavell 88: 34, my italic]

The upshot is that whatever one thinks about the merits of Gellner's assessment of OLP, his charge has allowed me to formulate a certain view of how Cavell fits into the history of ordinary language philosophy, and in the history of philosophy at large. At the same historical juncture as forces were gathering to attack the linguistic "orthodoxy" from the outside, Cavell in effect challenged that orthodoxy *from within the community of ordinary language philosophers itself*. In other words Cavell's writings, early to late, can be read as an immanent

critique of “grammatical reason,” meant as a prophylactic measure against the dangers of falling into dogmatism, of accepting ordinary language and ordinary language philosophy as a *given*, rather than something that must be constantly *redeemed*; redeemed every day, i.e. in everyday life and speech, reflecting the Lutheran contention that all of our lives, ordinary as they are, should be seen as *continuous baptism*. Indeed, Cavell’s philosophical modernism could be seen as a secular version – a secularization – of the view of ordinary life as a continuous baptism, or if you want, as a continuous miracle. In others words, the young Cavell’s “seriousness” (or call it, with Cavell’s words for Wittgenstein’s attitude, moral urgency) regarding the validity of his use of ordinary words and the authority of the “institution” of OLP to underwrite it, mirrors the young Luther’s earnestness regarding the validity of his salvation and the authority of the institution of the Church to underwrite *it*. That this comparison has something going for it is evidenced by the motto Cavell chose for *The Senses of Walden*, perhaps his most existential and personal work. Namely, to emblemize his own text Cavell picked the following words by Luther (and I record them as they are printed in the book):

For all our life should be baptism, and the
fulfilling of the sign, or sacrament, of baptism;
we have been set free from all else and wholly
given over to baptism alone, that is, to death and
resurrection. This glorious liberty of ours, and
this understanding of baptism have been carried
captive in our day.

Consequently, as I have intimated more than once, I think that the reformatory/dialectical strategy of Cavell is usefully illuminated by noting the “Lutheran” logic, not to say rhetoric, of Cavell’s writings. In fact, the figure of Luther, along with those of Augustine, Paul and Kierkegaard, even of Christ himself, looms as large in the background of Cavell’s work as it does in the background of Wittgenstein and Heidegger’s.¹⁵ For instance, Cavell writes in *The*

¹⁵ See for example Heidegger’s work on Augustine and Paul in the lectures on the phenomenology of the religious life from 1920-21 [Heidegger 04], and how eschatology provides the template for Heidegger’s analysis of temporality in *Being and Time*, as well as his later notion of the “history of Being.” This is highlighted in *Heidegger’s Religious Origins*. [Crowe 06] For a discussion of Wittgenstein’s case, see for instance P. Helm’s essay ‘Wittgensteinian religion and reformed epistemology’ in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*. [Arrington 04]

Senses of Walden that “Christ is to come with a sword, and in Revelation the sword is words.”
[Cavell 92: 17] And in ‘Ending the Waiting Game’ he writes that

We are Christ or we are nothing – that is the position Christ has put us
in. [Cavell 94: 147]

One might even suggest that the hermeneutical archetype of the Reformer, the bringer of a New Interpretation of the Tradition, alongside the eschatological archetype of the Redeemer/Reconciler, constitute a *leitmotif* in Cavell’s work. Namely, let us consider the quite early text ‘On Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*’ (1966/68) – one of Cavell’s least known essays, dealing with one of Kierkegaard’s least known books, which is dealing with Magister Adler’s almost *completely* unknown cycle of “Ethico-Religious” essays. Be that as it may, ‘On Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*’ contains a passage that demonstrates how Cavell eminently grasps what a powerful precedent the Christian tradition of internal criticism (i.e. redemptive reading, starting with the Christians (or Christ) applying a new politics of interpretation to the Jewish Law), is to the understanding of the dynamics of any reformatorical (read: modernist) project, including his own:

Nothing an outsider can say about religion has the rooted violence of things the religious have themselves had it at heart to say: no brilliant attack by an outsider against (say) obscurantism will seem to go far enough to a brilliant insider faced with the real obscurity of God; and attacks against religious institutions in the name of reason will not go far enough in a man who is attacking them in the name of faith.
[Cavell 94: 174]

If we make the right substitutions, I suggest, we can from this passage generate a very perspicuous (self-) portrait of Cavell’s philosophical-literary “persona,” or if you want, his “mask” (matching Austin’s Rabbi and Wittgenstein’s Sage.) Namely, let us perform the following substitutions: Religion -> OLP, the religious -> believers in OLP, God -> ordinary language, religious institutions -> ordinary language philosophers, reason -> logic, faith -> love of ordinary language. We then get

“Nothing an outsider can say about OLP has the rooted violence of things the believers in OLP have themselves had it at heart to say: no brilliant attack by an outsider against (say) obscurantism will seem to go far enough to a brilliant insider faced with the real obscurity of ordinary language; and attacks against ordinary language philosophers

in the name of logic will not go far enough in a man who is attacking them in the name of the love of ordinary language.”

Thus we have equipped the philosophical-literary persona of Cavell with a “mask” and a “tone”: those of a reformer. And we have assigned this persona to a historical “stage”: A scene in times of ideological conflict at home and wars abroad, populated by “dogmatic” ordinary language philosophers assuming poses of authority and making pronouncements on sense and non-sense in oracular tones, pronouncements that are greeted by “skeptical” voices, speaking in tones of suspicion and frustration vis-à-vis the orthodoxy, call it the censorship, of “what we say when.” Onto this stage steps the Cavell-persona of the Reformer, speaking out of the fires of his own tribulations, ready to reconcile the views of skeptics and dogmatists in his “redeemed” version of ordinary language philosophy, which shifts the discussion from the empirical to the utopian level.

However, the underlying problem with this gesture, as we shall find, is that it embarks Cavell on an infinite quest, where language must be redeemed again and again, in principle with every utterance. This predicament is mirrored in his philosophical-literary style, where every word of the text becomes *critical*; the success or failure of the text is enacted at every instant of it. That is, every instant of his text becomes a “baptism.” Thus the motif of the infinite quest, critical at every moment, is a deeply ingrained element of Cavell’s philosophical modernism, which naturally has romanticist roots. In effect, it offers us a sublime or quasi-religious perspective on the everyday; the everyday as a perpetual exception or miracle, which also makes it “uncanny”. Ultimately, this strategy causes what I regard as Cavell’s central dilemma; namely the dilemma of determining when we shall shift *back* from a sublime or quasi-religious vision of the ordinary, where every moment is in a sense a miraculous exception (a baptismal moment of “grace”), and return to an “ordinary” perspective on the ordinary, where must create our own stable society through the establishment of institutions. Indeed, I will argue that Cavell in effect *never* returns to an “ordinary” view of the ordinary (which means, as we shall see in Chapter 9, that he never gets to grip with the political realities of institutions either), instead pursuing his semi-eschatological vision of the ordinary in an “infinite essay”. But an elaboration of that criticism will have to wait for the later part of this dissertation; initially we will concentrate on developing Cavell’s project from within.

To summarize: While Gellner and others advocated the demolition of the edifice of OLP, on the grounds that it had completely outlasted its usefulness, and now merely hindered further progress, Cavell was busying himself with its internal reconstruction or *reformation*. Unfortunately, while Gellner's criticism is generally regarded to be almost painfully crude, Cavell's criticism is so subtle that it frequently evades detection altogether, and is mistaken for a defense of the orthodoxy. This is perhaps a provocative notion, but the fact is that the textual evidence points towards the interpretation that Cavell, for all his admiration for what had already been accomplished in OLP, in his early works voices an uneasiness about the ultimate significance of those accomplishments. Granted that the OLP procedures constitute the most "advanced" "methods" of the philosophy of the day (and Cavell grants this), the ones that one cannot in good conscience disregard, to what purpose are those "methods" to be put? This is the conundrum I see Cavell struggling with in his early essays. For instance, in 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', Cavell notes somewhat critically of his OLP colleagues that

I do not see how it can with good conscience be denied that ordinary language philosophers (for example, Austin and Ryle) have found and made trouble for traditional philosophy. *But the understanding of the trouble, and so the assessment of its seriousness or permanence is a project of a different order.* And I know of no effort of theirs at this task which carries anything like that immediate conviction which is so large a part of the power of their remarks when they are working within an investigation of ordinary language. [Cavell 94: 59, my italic]

On this note Cavell argues in 'Austin at Criticism', back-to-back with his rebuttal of Gellner, that even if ordinary language "methods" *do* offer, or force, a shift in the focus of philosophy, "the relevance of the shift should itself become a philosophical problem" [Cavell 94: 110]. Or alternatively that "a change of *style* in philosophy is a profound change, and itself a subject of philosophical investigation." [Cavell 94: 102] Thus the upshot of Cavell's attempt to validate Austin under fire from the "skeptics" (including Gellner) in 'Austin at Criticism,' is that Cavell is forced to conclude that the unresolved issue in OLP remains (like the skeptics are in effect saying) how grammatical analysis "can have the kind of power Austin attributes to it." [Cavell 94: 102] And the reason for this lacuna, as we have suggested, may lie in the fact that it touches upon a utopian promise that is so elusive that it resists a "straight" enunciation, and may therefore have to remain an "esoteric", indirect feature of the discourse of OLP, which is what drives Cavell in the direction of a modernist philosophical "style".

On these grounds Cavell finds it necessary to call, in rather strong words, for “a certain caution or discrimination in following Austin’s procedures, using his attempts to define in new and freer and more accurate terms the various failings —and hence the various powers— of philosophy, without imitating his complacency, and even prejudice, in attaching them where he sees (but has not proven) fit.” [Cavell 94: 110] The young Cavell’s reluctance to join the popular enthusiasm surrounding OLP’s “victory” over the tradition, is dramatized as a profound feeling of discomfort in observing how, having picked up some basic techniques, even the blandest student of OLP sees fit to dismiss the works of a Descartes or a Hegel as mere grammatical fallacies, completely devoid of any serious sense. In a language that could have been Gellner’s, Cavell testifies to his unease triggered by the spectacle of “any graduate student in good standing” making a blanket condemnation of 2500 years of metaphysical thought in the name of some hastily acquired tricks of the trade. “Anything would be pleasanter” Cavell admits,

than the continuing rehearsals—performable on cue by any graduate student in good standing—of how Descartes was mistaken about dreams, or Locke about truth, or Berkeley about God, or Kant about things-in-themselves or about moral worth, or Hegel about “logic,” or Mill about “desirable,” and so forth; or about how Berkeley mistook Locke, or Kant Hume, or Mill Kant, or everybody Mill, and so forth. Such “explanations” are no doubt essential, and they may account for everything we need to know, except why any man of intelligence and vision has ever been attracted to the subject of philosophy. [Cavell 94: 111]

In view of passages such as these, I conclude that it is because Cavell’s own misgivings about OLP does in fact have something in common with the ones voiced by Gellner (or Marcuse), that Cavell is at pains to explain exactly why a “line of criticism” such as Gellner’s is, despite everything, “less attractive than it has seemed to some philosophers to be.” [Cavell 94: 112]

With this we have set the stage for a reading of some of Cavell’s texts that will further emphasize the “unorthodox” nature of his view of Wittgenstein and OLP, one that has an implicit “utopian” dimension.

Chapter 2

‘Must We Mean What We Say?’

In order to make good on my contention that Cavell’s reflection on the “outstanding” problem of OLP – to describe the “sources or domain” of its “power” (which ultimately are the sources or domain of the power of language as such, the condition of *intelligibility* as such) – is a guiding thread running through his work, I am obliged to actually trace the progress of this thread through Cavell’s writings. Considering the prodigious scale of Cavell’ output, this can obviously not be done on a text-by-text basis. Consequently I will restrict myself to examining three texts, three locations or *topoi* (with an internal spacing in time of respectively ten and twenty years) that together indicate the direction of the line that, on my reading, connects Cavell’s early writings with his later work. Namely, I will deal with ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ in this chapter, ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ in Chapter 3, and finally with ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ in Chapter 4.¹⁶ In the course of these readings I will demonstrate how I interpret works by Cavell on the principles I have suggested so far. That is, I want to draw attention to a certain *dialectical pattern* recurrent in Cavell’s writings, what could be said to constitute a characteristic “genre” of his work.

A dialectical approach

Setting up a constellation of dogmatism and skepticism

According to Stephen Mulhall in ‘Stanley Cavell’s Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria, and Rules,’ Cavell is in the early essay ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ engaged in “defending the cogency of Austin’s (and Ryle’s) philosophical method of recalling what we say when” [Eldridge 03: 86]. I however, will argue that this appearance is deceptive. Or at least it is deceptively simple to describe the essay in this fashion. Rather, we should

¹⁶ The former two first published in, respectively, *Inquiry* (1958) and *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1968); the third initially presented as a Carus-lecture in 1988 and subsequently published with its companions as *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990).

realize that the attacker of OLP (in this case Benson Mates) is in effect used by Cavell as a proxy, in order to obliquely launch a “critique” of the orthodox ordinary-language philosophers, in this case Austin and Ryle themselves. Hence on my interpretation Cavell is not merely out to *defend* the “cogency of Austin’s (and Ryle’s) philosophical method”; he is also out to *question* that cogency. Question it for reasons of his own, to be sure, reasons that are certainly not Benson Mates’, given Mates’ commitment to the logical-empirical cause. Instead Benson Mates’ criticism is, on my reading, hijacked as the “ironical” vehicle or *occasion* for that questioning. In terms of the dialectical pattern I have in mind, this means that Mates is set up as the “skeptic,” while Austin and Ryle are set up as the “dogmatists.” The scene is thereby prepared for Cavell’s dialectical maneuvering, which ultimately will lead us to a viewpoint transcending both the “orthodoxy” of Austin/Ryle (at least as they are commonly read) and the “skepticism” of Mates.

Let us briefly review the context of ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ The essay is formulated as a response to Benson Mates’ paper ‘On the verification of statements about ordinary language’.¹⁷ As the title of Mates’ paper suggests, he is operating within a basically positivist paradigm, holding that knowledge can only be gained through either logical-mathematical analysis or empirical observation. Mates wishes to expose the emptiness of ordinary language philosophy’s attempt to go beyond these strictures, by pointing to a discrepancy between Austin’s and Gilbert Ryle’s analyses of a specific question of ordinary language (the grammars of “gift” and “voluntary”), and hence to a lack of definiteness in the procedures of ordinary language philosophy. Since, argues Mates, two ordinary language philosophers can arrive at opposite judgments of grammar, the one claiming that a gift can naturally be said to be given voluntarily, the other claiming that this would be an “unnatural” use, implying that something is “fishy” with the giving, their (supposedly common) procedure can not be trusted to yield consistent answers, hence not knowledge in any serious sense. Or, as Mates says, the fundamental “weakness” of the OLP “hypothesis” that anyone’s opinions, essayed from the armchair, on how we *do* use words should have any conclusive bearing on how we *ought to* use words, is shown up

...by the fact that the intuitive findings of different people, even of different experts, are often inconsistent. Thus, for example, while Prof.

¹⁷ Printed in *Inquiry* Vol. I, 1958, reprinted 1966. For some historical background, see Cavell’s ‘Counter-Philosophy and the Pawn of Voice’ in *A Pitch of Philosophy*. [Cavell 96a: 55-6]

Ryle tells us that “voluntary” and “involuntary” in their ordinary use are applied only to actions which ought not to be done, his colleague Prof. Austin states in another connection: “... for example, take ‘voluntarily’ and ‘involuntarily’: we may join the army or make a gift voluntarily, we may hiccup or make a small gesture involuntarily...” If agreement about usage cannot be reached within so restricted a sample as the class of Oxford Professors of Philosophy, what are the prospects when the sample is enlarged? [Mates 66: 165]

The characteristic Cavellian response to this charge, I contend, his dialectical gambit so to speak, is to admit that Mates, who here figures as a kind of “skeptic”, has a point. Whatever the result of ordinary language philosophy is, Cavell admits, it cannot be knowledge in any sense that implies logical or empirical verification. Indeed, in a sense it is not a question of *knowing* at all. In other words, right from the start Cavell has stepped back to a viewpoint “as from beyond this struggle.” [Cavell 90: 83] Cavell is not entirely defending Austin and Ryle, nor is he exactly rebutting Mates. Because what Cavell says in response to Mates is not that Mates is *wrong*; in fact, Cavell merely says that (*)

...some of the arguments Professor Mates brings against the Oxford philosophers he mentions are on the whole *irrelevant* to their main concerns. [Cavell 94: 2, my italic]

There are several qualifications and disclaimers in this sentence, most importantly the one I have italicized. And as we shall see, the reason that Cavell finds (“some of”) Mates’ arguments to be (“on the whole”) “irrelevant” to the “concerns” of the Oxford philosophers, is that Cavell takes those concerns to *not essentially be with knowledge*. Or *if* they are concerned with knowledge, it is not of the same kind that Mates is concerned with. However, in the same breath, Cavell has – crucially – intimated that the “Oxford philosophers” *themselves* are misguided in the way they claim knowledge on behalf of OLP. In other words, Cavell sets up the dialectical constellation that

- (1) Mates’ criticism against OLP’s claims to knowledge is *irrelevant* because
- (2) OLP is itself *misguided* in the way it is claiming knowledge.

The latter contention is of course far from uncontroversial to the followers of OLP. It is, in short, anything but orthodox. Hence, we are beginning to see how Cavell paints a dialectical picture where both the “skeptic” (Mates) and the “dogmatists” (Austin/Ryle as commonly read) partake of partial truths and partial falsities.

Let us therefore put Cavell's contention (*) in context. I quote at length, because the following passage confirms Cavell's unease about the orthodoxy (the "dogmas") of OLP, and his dialectical attempt at subverting it (without falling into, or falling in with, skepticism):

I shall want to say why, in my opinion, some of the arguments Professor Mates brings against the Oxford philosophers he mentions are on the whole irrelevant to their main concerns. And this will require me to say something about what I take to be the significance of proceeding, in one's philosophizing, from what we ordinarily say and mean. That will not be an easy thing to do without appearing alternately trivial and *dogmatic*. Perhaps that is only to be expected, given the depth and the intimacy of conflict between this way of proceeding in philosophy and the way I take Mates to be following. These ways of philosophy seem, like friends who have quarreled, to be able neither to tolerate nor to ignore one another. I shall frequently be saying something one could not fail to know; and that will appear trivial. I shall also be suggesting that something we know is being overemphasized and something else not taken seriously enough; and that will appear *dogmatic*. [Cavell 94: 2, my italic]

This does of course not mean that Cavell accepts Mates' "skepticism" as it stands, i.e. that Cavell bows to Mates' logical-empiricist grounds of criticism. But, as it turns out, what Cavell finds "truthful" in Mates' paper is, as it were, the seeds of a "critique of grammatical reason." Mates voices, as a proxy, Cavell's intuition that ordinary language philosophy has a tendency to fall for the temptation to uncritically exceed its reach, thus – in a way analogous to the fate of the rationalism portrayed in Kant's First Critique – turning "dogmatic." In this respect Mates is correct (albeit for the wrong reasons) in arguing that ordinary language philosophy tends to claim to have shown more than it really has. Still, where the "skeptic" (in this case Mates) goes wrong, as Cavell will consistently argue as his career unfolds, is in assuming that OLP has gone wrong because it has tried to go beyond empirico-logical methods. What *has* gone wrong, as we shall see in 'Knowing and Acknowledging', is rather that ordinary language philosophy believes that it deals in rigorous "knowledge" in the epistemic sense; rather, to anticipate somewhat, on Cavell's view it deals with *acknowledgement*. In other words, the dogmatic way in which orthodox OLP claims knowledge (reserving to itself the right to decide what language makes sense, to *know* this) in fact justifies Benson Mates' skeptical recourse to the question of verification. Thus in order for OLP to overcome the skeptic's demand for a method of verification, it must overcome its own temptation to make dogmatic claims to *knowledge*, i.e. knowledge as to what "makes sense" to say or not. The

way Cavell articulates this insight in the essay at hand is to remind “skeptical” and “dogmatic” alike of the “naturalness” of ordinary language, and its dynamic, historical character. As Cavell writes (**):

Here we need to remind ourselves that ordinary language is natural language, and that its changing is natural ... Some philosophers, apparently, suppose that because natural language is ‘constantly’ changing it is too unstable to support one exact thought, let alone a clear philosophy. But this Heraclitean anxiety is unnecessary: linguistic change is in itself an object of respectable study. And it misses the significance of that change. It is exactly because the language which contains a culture changes with the changes of that culture *that philosophical awareness of ordinary language is illuminating*; it is that which explains how the language we traverse every day contain undiscovered treasure. [Cavell 94: 42, my italic]

In this passage, like in (*) above, Cavell accomplishes a dual, or if you want, dialectical objective. In a very discrete and economical fashion he manages to make two points, points that, respectively, are profoundly controversial to both parties of the “struggle”: (1) The notion of an ideal, unchanging language is fundamentally “unnatural” or artificial, unsuitable for dealing with the complexities of actual human life. (2) The proper goal of ordinary language philosophy is to achieve “awareness of ordinary language” – awareness, *not* knowledge. And this “awareness,” if we scrutinize the quote (**), is promised to bring “illumination,” not certainty. The first move (1) would form part of any orthodox defense of OLP against a Benson Mates-type of attack, and is as such not very surprising. The move performed in (2), on the other hand, *is* rather surprising and unorthodox. Because in (2), Cavell in effect withdraws OLP’s claim to “knowledge” in a narrow sense, and replaces it with a much vaguer claim to “awareness.”

This shift of focus from knowledge to awareness foreshadows the model of OLP suggested in ‘Austin at Criticism’: Two ordinary-language philosophers that discuss a use of language are like two *critics* who discuss a work of art. What they are lodging against each other are not *claims of knowledge*, but *claims of awareness*. They are discussing whether certain features of the work *looks* or *sounds* “right” to them, not whether it is factually or logically *correct*. Yet – and this is the crucial point – despite the absence of logical/empirical knowledge-claims, the critics’ discussion might be seen as essentially *rational*, i.e. relying on argument, perception and the education of the interlocutors. What is at stake is after all a form of “rationality” if not

of rigorous “knowledge”; i.e. a form of rationality that cannot be understood in terms of the traditional “methods of verification”.¹⁸

The distinction between “criticism” and “verification” is reflected in the consideration that it seems more natural to talk about art-criticism being “illuminating” than about it being “certain.” This idea of “illumination” could be connected with the notion of a change of consciousness, bringing to our attention things that we were hitherto *blind* to. This notion is corroborated by what Wittgenstein writes in *Culture and Value*: “Work on philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more [rather] work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects from them.)” The implied comparison is that philosophy, like architecture, pertains to how one chooses to *inhabit* the world, and thus what kind of attitude one has to life.

Hence the aim of OLP could, in analogy with art-criticism, be regarded as provoking a change of consciousness or attitude. And, if we follow the lead of my reading of ‘Austin at Criticism’, such a change of attitude should be guided by the utopian vision of reconciliation in spontaneous agreement in judgment: we are trying to arrive at a common vision of life. Hence to come to agreement in an OLP-discussion is to come to share a whole way of looking at the world (of “uncovering” it in Heideggerian terms), not to determine isolated facts about how words *must* be used. Indeed, to the extent that Mates, on the one hand, and Ryle/Austin & Co. on the other, think that OLP *is* about establishing isolated linguistic facts, like an empirical science, they are *all* wrong. Either side tends to lose sight of what is elusive, and utopian, in the project of OLP.

Thus if Mates were to formulate an attack against this more oblique claim of OLP, he would have had to argue that the reflections of OLP were not *illuminating*, something which is a

¹⁸ Hence, contrary to what Mates’ suggests, statistical methods are of little help to OLP. Namely, as Cavell later writes in ‘Politics of Interpretation’:

Philosophers who proceed as Austin suggests will not be much interested to poll others for their opinion ... Then why do such philosophers say “we” instead of “I”? With what justification? They are saying what the everyday use is ... And by whose authority? Their basis is autobiographical, but they evidently take what they do and say to be representative or exemplary of the human condition as such. In this way they interpret philosophy’s arrogance as the arrogation of the right to speak for us, to say whatever there is to say in the human resistance to the drag of metaphysics and of skepticism; and authorize that arrogation in the claim to representativeness, expressed autobiographically. There is a humility or poverty essential to this arrogation, since appealing to the ordinariness of language is obeying it—suffering its intelligibility, alms of commonness—recognizing the mastery of it. [Cavell 88: 8]

question of a different order, and one that the disagreement between Austin and Ryle does not pertain critically to. And to be sure, Mates hardly appears inclined to condemn OLP as unenlightening, compare note 4 to ‘On the verification of statements about ordinary language’, where Mates writes that “I do not deny that the [OLP] method is adequate for many purposes.” [Mates 66: 171] On the other hand, Cavell’s unorthodox “defense” of OLP has been bought at the cost of reinterpreting the claims of OLP, certainly beyond what many adherents would have liked; say for instance what Gilbert Ryle would have liked. In short, Cavell has launched a “politics of interpretation” of OLP that leaves behind the likes of both Mates and Ryle.

To see this, let me attempt an example. Consider Ryle’s verdict (supposedly based on OLP-“methods”) in *The Concept of Mind* that Cartesian dualism is not only *false*, but plainly “absurd,” i.e. based on what Ryle sees as a category mistake. [Ryle 63: 17] Here Ryle implies that we *know*, can say with certainty, what “categories” it makes sense apply. It is considered as a *fact* that the words apply in *this* way, and not in *that*. Or so *he* might say. On the other hand, if one were to take the line that *we* have been taking, one would have to reduce this statement to a far more modest formulation: That the way Descartes uses some words emerge as *unenlightening* regarding the way we actually live our lives. In other words, we are not claiming to *know* that Descartes misapplied the words about mind; we are merely claiming that the way he did employ them does not sound right to us, i.e. does not illuminate us; rather, we could go on to say, it seems to confuse us. On *this* line, the dichotomy of body and soul, and its attendant language, is not so much “absurd” as it is “obscure” (and, one might say, obscuring.) Or to put it otherwise (invoking Wittgenstein), we might claim that the “axis of investigation” defined by the distinction of *res extensa* and *res cogitans* does not reflect our “real needs”; the needs of say, biological science or moral debate, or simply common sense. But this is not the same as saying that Descartes dealt in absurdities, or that everything he said was misguided, or that he belongs on the scrapheap of history, etc. It merely means, to reiterate, that we are claiming, one could even say arguing, that in some senses the distinctions Descartes drew, and the words he put on them, *do not illuminate us*. Consequently we think the distinctions should be redrawn, which means that one should also *speak* in a different manner. And that should be an honest enough, and rational enough, claim. All we are saying is that in our judgment, on the *whole*, it sounds more “right” to speak of (say) the *person* as “being conscious”, rather than talking about the consciousness as a “substance” somehow attached to a machine. In this case we are not trying to ascertain a *fact* about the use

of the word “consciousness”; we are merely hoping that through a discussion of possible ways of speaking our interlocutor will come round to seeing the world (and the human person) in a way that agree with ours.

On this note Cavell concludes the essay by discretely noting that what OLP teaches us (to *his* mind) is in effect to be aware of how we depend on words, and thus to take heed of how we can become as it were *addicted* to (entangled in) certain formulations and distinctions. As Cavell sums up:

Professor Mates, at one point in his paper, puts his doubts about the significance of the claims of ordinary language this way: “Surely the point is not merely that if you use the word ‘voluntary’ just as the philosopher does, you may find yourself entangled in the philosophic problem of the Freedom of the Will” ... Perhaps the reason he thinks this a negligible consequence is that he hears it on analogy with the assertion, “If you use the term ‘space-time’ just as the physicist does, you may find yourself entangled in the philosophic problem of simultaneity.” The implication is that the problem must simply be faced, not avoided. I, however, hear the remark differently: If you use alcohol just as the alcoholic does, or pleasure as the neurotic does, you may find yourself entangled in the practical problem of the freedom of the will. [Cavell 94: 43]

In other words, what Cavell is intimating is that certain philosophical distinctions can cripple our *will*, or if you want, impair our power of judgment. But this does not mean that OLP has some super-knowledge other schools of philosophy does not; it only pays closer attention to the way we use words, is more *conscious* about it. This reconciliatory tone could be said to lift somewhat the sense of oppression – a sense we might suspect Cavell to share – regarding the contention that “what we ordinarily say and mean may have a direct and deep control over what we can philosophically say and mean.” [Cavell 94: 1] In other words, the sense of oppression induced by OLP’s claims about what we “can” say and what we “must” mean, and so forth.

Thus what Cavell has come on the track of in ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’, I suggest, is a way to preserve the claims of OLP, but with a reformed understanding of what they imply. Because, the idea of language “controlling” what we can (philosophically or not) say and mean, has through the course of the essay (at least tentatively) been disentangled from rigoristic *epistemic* notions of “knowledge” and “certainty.” OLP has come out as having

more to do with how the manner of our use of words in a subtle way influences our way of thinking, than with establishing the *facts* of linguistic usage. Which again indicates that the ideal that informs OLP is tied up with a utopian vision of spontaneous agreement in *judgment*, rather than with a notion of following *rules* of language correctly. Hence, we could say that we are left not with a statement of what OLP *really* is (or a straightforward defense of Austin and Ryle), but with a somewhat open ending; a perspective, a suggestion about which direction to look in (or look away from.)

Surveying the result of the dialectic Leaving skepticism and dogmatism behind

As we have seen, I maintain that already in ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ Cavell is initiating a shift from an image of the ordinary-language philosopher as a kind of *researcher* (dealing in knowledge and certainty), to the image of him as a kind of *critic* (dealing in awareness and illumination.) In other words, in the passage (**) above, the thought-figures informing OLP is implicitly shifted from a *scientific* paradigm to an *aesthetic* paradigm, a maneuver that Cavell develops in essays such as ‘Austin at Criticism’ and ‘Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy.’ This move, as we have noted, disarms Benson Mates’ charge on two counts:

- (1) The disagreement between Austin and Ryle now becomes not a fatal contradiction (as it would be in a strictly logical-empirical setting), but something like (in a manner and degree that remains to be understood) the disagreement between two art critics.
- (2) The demand for a method of verification is rendered void, since such a method is no longer relevant to the kind of claim that OLP is lodging.

However, and this is the essential thrust of my dialectical reading:

- (3) The price that has to be paid for this deflection of the criticism leveled against it is that the “orthodox” understanding of OLP is undermined. The ordinary language philosopher can no longer claim privileged knowledge about the *facts* of linguistic usage, of “what we say when”. Hence the ordinary language philosopher no longer

has the authority to condemn a certain form of language (say that of the skeptic) as strictly *nonsensical*.

To reiterate, OLP is, on the “critical” model suggested here, no longer in a position to claim to *know* what kind of language-use has “sense” or not. The best it can do is to enter a claim as to whether a certain use of language *looks* or *sounds* right to a sensitive eye and ear, one that is educated in the relevant idiom and tradition. In other words, the ordinary-language philosopher can no longer dogmatically pass the verdict “these words makes no sense (period)” but must restrict himself to claiming, in a given context, “these words do not sound right,” and then proceed to try to show *why* they don’t sound right, i.e. to make perspicuous to his interlocutor what “false note” he has become aware of. The justification of the ordinary-language philosopher’s *judgment*, like that of the critic’s, will then be evaluated in terms of his ability to attract the other’s assent on the basis of a reasoned demonstration, one that is not addressed to the idiosyncrasies of the specific other, but to a “generalized other,” that is, any competent person that is prepared to look at and listen seriously to the matter at hand.

We shall return to Cavell’s vision of an aesthetical “model” for OLP subsequently. For the moment, suffice it to say that Cavell’s dialectical movement ‘In Must We Mean What We Say?’ has brought us to the kind of position that I suggested it would: To a viewpoint beyond both the “dogmatic” thesis (that OLP possesses a special *knowledge* about language) and the “skeptic”’s (Mates’) anti-thesis (that ordinary language philosophy contradicts itself.) And we have indeed been induced to see that the skeptical criticism of the dogmatic point of view has something going for it, but *not what the skeptic had imagined*. Which is to say that we have transcended both the claim and the counter-claim of knowledge, and instead gained not a new “knowledge,” but a new perspective. What this perspective is about is what the remainder of Cavell’s production – and the present dissertation – is about.

The unity of Cavell’s work in relation to ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’

On the above reading ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ does not merely constitute a point of departure for the rest of Cavell’s work; it forms an essential point of *continuity* with it. This understanding contradicts the one offered by Mulhall in ‘Stanley Cavell’s Vision of the

Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria, and Rules.’ [Eldridge 03] In this essay Mulhall is ascribing to the Cavell of ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ a rather simplistic, “orthodox” understanding of ordinary language and its analysis, one that holds that the ordinary use of words provide rule-like criteria that enable us to say when an X is properly deemed a Y (or called “Y”) – for example, when a given bird is called a “bittern.” Here we recognize the tendency, which we warned against earlier, to identify Cavell’s vision with more orthodox accounts of language. Specifically, I am thinking about the accounts based on the notions of grammatical frameworks and conceptual schemes. Still it is on the assumption that Cavell *did* adhere to some such model in ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ that Mulhall is erecting what I regard as his highly problematic argument regarding the genesis of Cavell’s understanding of OLP. Namely, Mulhall is arguing that when the “mature” Cavell is attacking the notion of grammatical rules of language, as he indeed does in CH&UH,¹⁹ Cavell is in reality just attacking a rather *narrow conception* of rules, in effect *the one Cavell himself held* in his younger days. Which is, according to Mulhall, the conception of ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ rather than the broader understanding Mulhall is attributing to Cavell’s later work (and which Mulhall himself is subscribing to.) Specifically, Mulhall’s thesis is that there occurred a significant shift in Cavell’s understanding of OLP between ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ and Cavell’s next major essay, ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s later Philosophy,’ consisting in a transfer of allegiance, as it were, from Austin to Wittgenstein. It is on the merits of this kind of considerations that Mulhall concludes that

...the deep problem Cavell identifies ... appears to lie, not in the very idea that criteria might be thought of as *rules*, but in a particular use to which particular versions of that idea might be put. [Eldridge 03: 83, my italic]

This is more or less the same as Mulhall says in his reply to Affeldt in the *European Journal of Philosophy*; “the true dispute between Cavellians and the more orthodox Wittgensteinian commentators does not concern whether one thinks of grammar and criteria as species of rule, but rather how one envisages the grammar of the concept of rule.” [Mulhall 98b: 42] I.e. Mulhall’s motive for presenting Cavell’s intellectual development as he does, it turns out, is to save as much as possible of his original interpretation of Cavell in *Recounting of the ordinary* from the devastation of Affeldt’s criticism.

¹⁹ Contra Saul Kripke; we shall return to this in our reading of ‘The Argument of the Ordinary.’

On my account, however, the temptation to think this way must be resisted. It must be resisted, as I have suggested, because the reading I have just performed of ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ indicates, contra Mulhall, that already in this early text Cavell had become critical of some aspects of what Mulhall sees as the “Austinian” (i.e. “pre-Wittgenstein”) approach to OLP. To my mind Cavell *is* in fact suspecting that it might turn into a blind alley if pursued dogmatically, which is why, on my reading, he stops short of an all-out rebuttal of Mates’ criticism of Austin and Ryle, instead electing to use it for his own critical purposes. Further, my reading indicates that the dialectical dynamic of Cavell’s reasoning in ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ *already* allows Cavell to move beyond Austin, while still retaining what he sees as Austin’s essential insights.

If this is a felicitous reading, it implies that Mulhall’s theory that there occurred a significant shift concerning the status of rules in Cavell’s understanding of OLP between ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ and ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy’ is unenlightening. On my reading, it instead becomes plausible to suggest that already in ‘Must We Mean What We Say’ Cavell’s movement towards an unorthodox view of OLP was well underway (comprising a disregard for the notion of rules, in any form), and that Cavell’s idiosyncratic approach to OLP merely *flourished* in the reading of Wittgenstein in ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s later Philosophy.’ This leads me, as I will elaborate in my reading of ‘The Argument of the Ordinary,’ to reject both (1) Mulhall’s general thesis, that rules and frameworks are central to Cavell’s notion language, and (2) his more limited thesis, that Cavell’s thought underwent a fundamental shift from ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ to ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s later Philosophy’ that made him an adherent of a so to speak “expanded” notion of linguistic rules. To the contrary, I uphold my support for Affeldt’s contention that (a) the idea of “our language as a grammatical framework of rules” is “essentially absent from Cavell,” and that (b) to insist on reconstructing Cavell’s view in these terms represents “a movement back toward a more familiar understanding of [OLP] which Cavell has sought to move beyond and at the same time away from some of the most central, difficult and philosophically fertile aspects of Cavell’s work.” [Affeldt 98: 1] In view of this, the advantage of my reading is twofold.

(1) It provides a more coherent presentation of Cavell’s work by taking that work itself to be more coherent than Mulhall portrays it.

(2) It shows Cavell to be from the start on the track of a critical-aesthetical model for OLP, one that bypasses the notion of rules, and renders superfluous any recourse to grammatical “frameworks” of language.

Having said this, I will discuss more explicitly the dangers of collapsing Cavell’s precarious dialectical composition into a more familiar, and one-dimensional, set of philosophical ideas.

Rules, frameworks and conceptual schemes:

How *not* to read Cavell

My mapping out of Cavell’s own rhetoric in terms of a dialectical pattern (in effect attributing to Cavell a similar mode of proceeding as *he* attributes to Wittgenstein) stands in contrast to what could be called the *undialectical* way(s) of reading Cavell. The undialectical mode of reading I find to be paradigmatically represented by Mulhall’s *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy’s Recounting of the Ordinary*. In Mulhall’s influential book we are presented with a rather straightforward strategy for reading Cavell, yielding a rather straightforward message. An integral part of Cavell’s message, on this account, is that

...the grammatical framework of language is the fulcrum upon which the whole of our experience of the world turns. [Mulhall 98: 171]

Clearly, the contention that it is at all possible, let alone advisable to administer such a straightforward thesis about language on Cavell’s behalf, affects one’s pattern of reading his texts. As far as I can see, in a strategy of reading informed by the Mulhallian notion of a “grammatical framework”, a Cavellian text is typically taken to (a) outline the grammatical structure/framework of language in terms of the notion of rules/criteria, and then to (b) show that the skeptic’s claim can be “dissolved” in the familiar manner by demonstrating it to be in violation of this framework. Thus Mulhall writes:

...not just anything we do will count as making a knowledge-claim; the sceptic cannot simply ignore the fact that claims to know something are a species of assertion, and that not just anything (even anything true) can (intelligibly) be asserted to anyone at any time. And how do we know this? Because, as the sceptic’s confusion invites us to remind ourselves, we grasp the criteria for knowledge-claims, the shared grammatical framework of assertion. [Mulhall 98b: 44]

Let us now see how the dilemmas of characterizing this framework connect with what I find problematic in Mulhall's understanding of Cavell/Wittgenstein in *Recounting of the ordinary*. Namely: "[T]he grammar of our language determines a space of possibilities," Mulhall writes, and continues:

In Wittgensteinian terms, the world determines which of those spaces are filled; we can investigate the latter only by looking to see what is the case, but we can investigate the former from our armchair by utilizing our knowledge of the criteria governing the application of the words of our natural language to the world. Since these criteria determine what it is for something to be an instance of water, an umiak, a boat, and so on, then an investigation of what we should say when teaches us as much about the world as it does about language. [Mulhall 98: 18]

Judging from this passage, Mulhall's interpretative strategy merely perpetuates, with some minor qualifications, the processing of Wittgenstein/Cavell under the most staid categories of linguistic philosophy. And not merely that; in the quote above Mulhall in effect resorts to a version of what Davidson has called the "third dogma of empiricism": the distinction between a conceptual *scheme* ("a space of possibilities") and its *content* (the filling-in or instantiation of positions within that space.) The conceptual scheme is a thought-figure that, very broadly speaking, goes back to Kant's first Critique, and works its way up to modern times through the movement of neo-Kantianism and its counterparts in Anglo-Saxon "linguistic" philosophy. Writes Davidson in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1974):

Philosophers of many persuasions are prone to talk of conceptual schemes. Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes, and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme. Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another. [Davidson 84: 183]

Davidson argues that despite its illustrious history the notion of a conceptual scheme is an unnecessary, confusing, and in fact outmoded relic in the philosophy of mind and language. Specifically, as I understand Davidson, he holds that the notion of a conceptual scheme is typically a function of the idea of language as an instrumental *construct*; i.e. the notion of a

conceptual scheme is a function of how one conceives language as a “grid” (call it a framework) put together according to certain rules, like a coordinate system, to give shape to a certain *content*. In keeping with this instrumentalism and constructivism the conceptual scheme is typically imagined as imposing form on a realm that is in it self formless or at least chaotic. Hence the “structure” is inherently in the language, and not in the world. We shall not discuss the general merits and demerits of this view, per se. What I want to make clear is that I think Mulhall is misrepresenting *Cavell* by exceedingly portraying language (in Cavell’s name) as a schematic structure in something very close to the old-fashioned sense. It is this that brings Steven Affeldt to complain that

Mulhall’s account makes focal an idea, essentially absent from Cavell, of our language as a grammatical framework of rules. It is, according to Mulhall, our operating with words within this framework which represents the condition for the intelligibility of any individual act of speech and which ensures our mutual intelligibility. In ... making central the idea of language as a framework of rules, Mulhall’s account of the ground of intelligibility represents, in my view, a movement back toward a more familiar understanding of Wittgenstein which Cavell has sought to move beyond [Affeldt 98: 1]

The gist of the trouble is that while I take Cavell to merely point out that *learning* language and *learning* about the world go together (in a Wittgensteinian “scene of instruction”), Mulhall portrays Cavell as regarding language as a *structure* that essentially determines what one can and cannot say. My interpretation of Cavell’s understanding of the relation between world and language is therefore the opposite of Mulhall’s. The meaning of words is not determined by their place in the linguistic structure, but by their use in a *form of life*. And this form of life cannot in itself be structurally determined; it has to be lived.

To wit, Mulhall writes, as we have seen, that “the grammar of our language determines a space of possibilities,” and that “the world determines which of those spaces are filled” [Mulhall 98: 18] Contrary to this I am arguing that based on Cavell’s reception of Wittgenstein, one should rather say that language-use is embedded in a form of life, and that one therefore cannot investigate language as a well-defined framework or “space” of possibilities. Hence, as we shall discuss in Chapter 5, on a roughly Cavellian view, to learn language – to develop our linguistic capacities – implies to recognize “family-resemblances” in the world, and on the basis of this recognition to *imaginatively* project words that one has

become acquainted with in similar situations. It is this element of “imagination” (and hence “attunement”) that I find to be essentially lacking from Mulhall’s interpretation of Cavell. Because if we take the approach I am recommending, based on the role of “attunement”, “imagination” and “seeing-as” in our forms of life (as we shall in Chapter 5), the notion of linguistic frameworks recedes into the background. On this view we must, as Cavell puts it, not only bring the dictionary to the world, but also bring “the world to the dictionary”:

What seemed like finding the world in a dictionary was really a case of bringing the world to the dictionary. We had the world with us all the time, in that armchair; but we felt the weight of it only when we felt a lack in it. [Cavell 94: 20]

I read this passage as saying: A language does not just impose meaning on the world (which would otherwise remain a formless chaos), it is also the other way around; the world imposes, through a certain practice, a certain meaning on *it*. Which is to say that just the structure of a language does not provide all there is to know about it. The existence of “spaces” to be filled in can similarly be regarded as purely mythical and figurative. I think this jibes better with both what Cavell says and what Wittgenstein says. For instance, in the PU Wittgenstein argues that even in employing formal mathematical symbols, one has a “sideways glance” on their worldly applications. Consequently, the world gives meaning to the symbol as much as the other way around. Thus it is the *form of life* which counts, what we do with the symbol *in* the world. He writes:

...we can contrast different kinds of formula, and the different kinds of use (different kinds of training) appropriate to them. Then we call formulae of a particular kind (with the appropriate methods of use) ‘formulae which determine a number y for a given value of x , and formulae of another kind, ones which ‘do not determine the number y for a given value of x .’ ... The proposition ‘The formula ... determines a number y ’ will then be a statement about the form of the formula – and now we must distinguish such a proposition as ‘The formula which I have written down determines y ’, or ‘Here is a formula which determines y ’, from one of the following kind: ‘The formula $y = x^2$ determines the number y for a given value of x .’ The question ‘Is the formula written down there on that determines y ?’ will then mean the same as ‘Is what is there a formula of this kind or that?’ [PU §189]

So, if we take the singular terms (say x and y) of an expression to demarcate the “spaces” that are to be “filled in” in our linguistic framework, we are still not entitled, on the reasoning

above, to simply assume that these terms or spaces *determines* (to use Wittgenstein's term) a specific content. Because what do we mean by "determine"? Before we can understand how the expression "determines" anything, we must first ask what practice it should be understood as relating to, which means that we must have some prior fix on what kind of "world" (universe of discourse) the singular terms are supposed to apply to. The terms do not *create* a universe of discourse on their own account; they merely contribute to highlighting it, making us see what Wittgenstein calls "connections" and "family-resemblances". Indeed, if anything could be said to "create" a universe of discourse, on Wittgenstein's logic, then it must be a form of life as a whole. Consequently

...it is not clear off-hand what we are to make of the question 'Is $y = x^2$ a formula which determines y for a given value of x ?' One might address this question to a pupil in order to test whether he understands the use of the word 'to determine'; or it might be a mathematical problem to prove in a particular system that x has only one square. [PU §189]

Let me attempt a similar example to elucidate the significance of Wittgenstein's. Say someone writes down the Pythagorean theorem in algebraic symbols. This linguistic structure does not necessarily induce me to see a world full of triangles, even though it does in principle describe just that, triangles. To the contrary, on its own it may tell me nothing. But then, when someone draws a triangle, and shows me what can be done with it in relation to the algebraic symbols, *then* the linguistic structure may start to make some sense. But this is not the same as just "filling in" some measurable quantities for the a , b and c (denoting the sides of the triangle); it presupposes, as Wittgenstein suggests in the paragraph just quoted, that one has been introduced to a whole mathematical practice, and thus to a form of life.²⁰ Hence, in general, the intelligibility of our environment cannot depend unilaterally on a linguistic structure, since the significance of the structure depends on what can be done with it in what Cavell calls, in the quote above, "the world". Meaning that the significance of the expression is to some extent *defined* in terms of the world (utilizing models or "paradigms", and so forth²¹); thus the world must have some significance for us prior to the imposition of just any linguistic framework.

²⁰ Compare the way instruction in geometry is described in Plato's *Meno*.

²¹ Cf. our discussion of language-learning in Chapter 5.

This indicates that the relation between the intelligibility of the world and the intelligibility of language is somehow circular (i.e. constellating in a hermeneutical circle). Rather than relating in manner where language *projects* meaning onto the “meaningless” world, world and language inform each other mutually. They are, as Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, “equiprimordial”. But if we admit this, then Mulhall’s contention that “the grammatical framework of language is the *fulcrum* upon which the whole of our experience of the world turns” (my italic) becomes rather misleading. On the contrary, I take it that what Wittgenstein is trying to show us with his examples is that one should *not* fall for the temptation to speak about any “fulcrum” (in the form of some kind of structure or scheme) around which *all* the rest of our experience turns. Every sentence, and every experience, is as it were equally important as all the rest.

Thus Mulhall comes, by the force of his own choice of words, precariously close to reviving the distinction of analytic (linguistic) / synthetic (factual) truths; that is, he comes close to saying that knowledge of criteria *is* “analytic” knowledge. (The possibility of which constitutes the *second* “dogma” of empiricism.) Contra this line of thinking Davidson argues that we simply do not need the notion of this intermediate schematic layer between language (or mind) and the world. As Davidson writes:

Of course truth of sentences remains relative to *language*, but that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false. [Davidson 84: 198, my italic]

If we transpose this to Cavell’s philosophical paradigm (leaving Davidson behind), we are, in his locution, more or less “attuned” to the world, and to each other, in language. We shall hear more about that “attunement” in Chapter 4, but the crucial thing to note for now, is that according to the view I ascribe to Cavell (to the extent any systematic view can be ascribed to him at all), learning language go together with confronting exemplary *samples* and *judgments*, in what he calls the “scene of instruction.” In order to examine the conditions for calling something, say, “water,” we might have to examine a sample of water, or several samples of it, and see how it is handled. On this view, the “grammatical” investigation would only start to yield its real dividends when we examined the words *in their natural environment*, as uncovered in a “form of life”, but then it would no longer be an investigation from the armchair, nor one directed at language qua scheme/framework.

Another way of approaching language's dependence on forms of life rather than on structure is to consult P. F. Strawson's early essay 'On Referring' (first appearing in *Mind* 1950), where he criticizes Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions. Strawson's argument is that denotation is not constituted by the structure of an expression, but is a function of the expression's *use*. In his essay Strawson argues that "mentioning" or referring is not something an *expression* does (on its own accord), but something that *someone* does, i.e. "can use an expression to do" [Strawson 74: 8] relative to a practice, which means in relation to an already intelligible *world*. For example we might imagine a numeral painted on a bridge which, provided certain practices of reading, driving, quantifying etc., denotes the strength of the bridge (say its load-capacity measured in tons.) In this instance it is not the structure of the numeral (or of a numeral-sentence) alone that carries the burden of reference, but the specific manner and context of using it *as* a sign. Hence reference, on Strawson's view, is not a question of linguistic structure, but of a form of life. Correspondingly, a certain practice has to be initiated at a certain point; somebody must be the first to start painting numerals on bridges for safety-purposes, so that in posterity a numeral on a bridge is perceived *as* a sign indicating its carrying capacity. Meaning that Strawson's notion of reference-as-practice implies the necessity of *exemplary acts* of referring. This view, which Strawson promulgated in his ordinary-language period, means that in explaining a sign – such as "hammer" or "beautiful" or "love" or "pass me the rabbit" – we must *demonstrate*, exemplarily, how we actually employ it, or *would* actually employ it (utilizing a model etc.), in the world.

On this view the whole distinction between a grammatical and a factual investigation crumbles, including the implicit notion of a grammatical framework. Indeed, so does any attempt to rebut *skepticism* from the armchair just by discussing the "structure" of language. Because a Cavellian "recounting of criteria"²² only works if we *already* to some extent share a form of life (i.e. of doing things, also with words); and *if* we do so, then the simile of "filling" content into linguistic "spaces" becomes rather empty, even misleading. Because conversely, if we don't share a form of life the mere "filling in" of "spaces" matters little, since what we need to get clear is the *way of seeing* the world, embedded in a form of life, which makes those "spaces" and structures meaningful in the first place. Indeed, such a linguistic-structural attempt, as we shall repeatedly find, to put an end to the skeptical questioning does in turn

²² Cf. our discussion of this in Chapter 5.

only feed the skeptical notions of what ought to constitute a “proof” of the existence of the world, of others, etc. This is exactly why, as I understand Cavell, the “armchair” arguments against the skeptic should not be pursued. Instead we should leave the armchair and submerge ourselves in various forms of life; only then, when “everyday” matters become pressing, will the skeptical concerns fade. To invoke a Wittgensteinian simile:

Philosophical clarity will have the same effect ... as sunlight has on the growth of potato shoots. (In a cellar they grow yards long.)
[Wittgenstein 74: 381]

Only in the “sunlight” of substantial everyday *concerns* (chasing away the shadows of doubt) would we really acknowledge the world *as* world (*the* world, *our* world), and thus, find ourselves acknowledged *by* the world. Yet the crux is that before one can get to that point of submersion in everyday life, one must break down the conceptual prison – the theoretical *pictures* – that keeps one aloof from the “friction” of the world. And that “liberating” (rather than proof-oriented) process is the dialectics that I have attributed to Cavell’s texts. It is in this sense that Cavell’s writings can be regarded as “critical”, offering a “critique” of language, quite apart from the notions of “conceptual schemes” descended from the formalism of Kant’s first Critique.²³

To conclude: In a perspective such as Mulhall’s in *The Recounting of the Ordinary*, Cavell’s texts are seen as typically having a *positive* point of departure, a “thesis” that is to be defended, namely a notion of the structure of language, and concomitantly, an analysis of what can or cannot be done in terms of that structure. In contrast, in the dialectical type of reading that I propose, Cavell’s text has a *negative* point of departure, namely an orthodox (or “dogmatic”) conception of ordinary language philosophy he wants to question. This questioning is launched by proxy, i.e. in the name of a “skeptical” antagonist, which, as it turns out, is also criticized during the proceedings, it being a requirement of the “genre” that Cavell disagree with the self-understanding of the skeptical antagonist as well. The upshot is that the vantage point we are left with (or left *at*), is one that has (in the course of the text) moved beyond both dogmatism and skepticism. Meaning that one has gained a new awareness of our being in language, yet without having characterized language structurally. This accounts for the feeling that Cavell’s texts tend to have a somewhat “open” ending;

²³ A notion somewhat more in keeping with Kant’s *third* Critique, as we shall find in Chapter 6.

indeed, the rhetorical effect is not supposed to be one of delivering a final verdict on a controversial issue (having heard what the opposing parties have to say for themselves), but of having, in the Wittgensteinian sense, removed something that stood in the way of a perspicuous view of things. And what obscures our vision is skepticism and dogmatism alike – both of which arises from the fixation that we need to, or should in principle be able to, characterize language, or what is really at stake, the intelligibility of the world and each other, *theoretically*.

The pattern I discern in much of Cavell's writing is therefore the following: (1) A negative start, that moves through (2) another negation (i.e. generating a double negation) towards (3) a sublation that does not take the form of a concluding thesis, but of a new vantage point, i.e. an "open" ending instructing us, as it were, "now you can go on" (with a new awareness of things.) If we read with this basic pattern in mind, I maintain, the layout of Cavell's text appears more deliberately *composed*, and less willfully, or helplessly, obscure and complex. The dialectical style is, so to speak, part of Cavell's self-consciously non-systematic "mode" of philosophy, an antidote against the prejudices of dogmatism and skepticism alike.

Chapter 3

‘Knowing and Acknowledging’

I think few texts of Cavell’s evidences the dialectical structure I have been outlining more explicitly than ‘Knowing and Acknowledging,’ written in response to John Malcolm’s ‘The Privacy of Experience’ (1967).²⁴ In ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ Cavell uncompromisingly casts Malcolm in the dialectical role of an orthodox, not to say “dogmatic” subscriber to OLP; one that does not realize the significance of acknowledgement, because he fails to see the “truth” of skepticism which that significance springs from. Indeed, John Malcolm has, as is well known, been a leading figure in the use of Wittgenstein to combat the idea of the “innerness” (privacy) of experience. Malcolm’s approach to the categories of the mental, which is also typically attributed to Roger Albritton, is basically (more or less in keeping with Ryle²⁵) that concepts of *mind* are really concepts of certain types of observable *behavior* or dispositions to such; hence to ascribe to someone a certain inner state (experience) *is* to ascribe to them a certain type of observable actions or dispositions to actions. This way of thinking about subjectivity is backed up by Malcolm and Albritton’s general view of “criteria”; as Espen Hammer comments, according to the view of Malcolm and Albritton:

...the purpose of eliciting criteria is to establish the existence of object X with certainty. As opposed to symptoms, which contingently mark something off as something (experience has hitherto taught us that the object coincides with the symptom), on their view the presence of criteria of X provide empirical certainty of the occurrence of X. The necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s being the case are then satisfied; and hence the existence of the object is beyond dispute.
[Hammer 02: 39]

²⁴ Cavell also refers to an article by J. W. Cook: ‘Wittgenstein on Privacy’ (1966), but I shall concentrate on Malcolm for simplicity.

²⁵ For a useful comparison of Malcolm and Ryle, see the review of E. J. Furlong’s *Imagination* by John W. Yolton in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 59, No. 12. (Jun. 7, 1962), pp. 329-332.

Because of this I shall call Malcolm's criteria "apodictic" (i.e. certain.) In connection with subjective states, Malcolm's criterial apodicticism dictates a view which S. Shieh describes in the following terms in the essay 'The Truth of Skepticism':

...in particular, Wittgensteinian criteria of mental concepts consist of (types of) behaviors that guarantee the existence of mental states instantiating these concepts. As Malcolm puts it in the case of criteria for pain: "The satisfaction of the criterion of y establishes the existence of y beyond question.... [I]t will not make sense for one to suppose that another person is not in pain if one's criterion of his being in pain is satisfied." [Crary 01: 132]

Hence the criteria for someone having an *experience*, say of happiness, are of necessity criteria dealing with the existence of observable events, such as smiling. This obviously takes the interpretation of Wittgenstein in a markedly behaviorist direction; it also makes short shrift of the very *formulation* of other-mind skepticism, the elimination of which form a vital part of the motivation for this rendering of criteria. In sum, as Shieh concludes, according to Malcolm

...on the basis of knowing that the criteria for pain are satisfied we can *know* that someone is in pain; this shows the falsity of the skeptical thesis that we cannot have knowledge of other minds. On this interpretation Wittgenstein naturally appears, as he did to Chihara and Fodor, as advocating a variety of behaviorism. [Crary 01: 132]

A version of this strategy is applied in 'The Privacy of Experience', where Malcolm's approach to other-mind skepticism is to diagnose how "same" is grammatically misused to generate skeptical conclusions when speaking of "having the same pain." The skeptic claims that we cannot have the *same* pain as anyone else, and thus that we cannot *know* the pain of others. Malcolm dismisses this concern with an appeal to ordinary language, that is, to how – according to him – language is ordinarily used. According to Malcolm, "same" in this case simply means, or should mean, being given equal description. So if two people describe their pains the same way, there is nothing more to it: they *have* the same pain. In other words, Malcolm claims to be certain that the correct grammar of "same" in relation to pain is one of descriptive identity; hence he is certain that the skeptic is using the word incorrectly when he doubts the possibility of knowing other people's pain. As Hammer says:

Applied to the example of pain, the Malcolm-Albritton view entails that, under certain circumstances, a person who satisfies criteria of pain – who winces/ groans, wrings his hands, in short exhibits violent

pain-behavior – necessarily is in pain: the presence of pain-behavior, itself serving as a criterion of pain, rules out that he is *not* hurting.
[Hammer 02: 39, my italic]

Hence Malcolm is certain that other-mind skepticism is meaningless; it has, so to speak, been dissolved in terms of “necessary truths” about language, or if you want, in terms of what I have called “apodictic” criteria. Admittedly, this is a brief rendering of Malcolm’s general view, as well as of ‘The Privacy of Experience.’ The important thing for now, however, is only to provide enough background to make clear how Malcolm figures in Cavell’s dialectical “drama” in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging.’ The dialectical structure of the text, and *only* the dialectical structure, is what concerns us for the present. And what we should have suspected by now, in view of everything we have considered so far, is that Malcolm’s brazen appeal to behavioral criteria (and the apodictic certainty they purportedly provide) ought to attract the critical attention of Cavell. That is, as we have noted, Malcolm takes it for granted that *if* the criteria are genuinely and not only seemingly satisfied (by faking etc.), *then* we cannot mistake the state or thing in question. Meaning that in the view of Malcolm behavioral criteria – which are inherently “descriptive” and outer in their notion of identity – are essentially *exhaustive* of the phenomenon in question, including the most complex subjective phenomena.²⁶ Needless to say, Malcolm’s approach to criteria, and beyond that to OLP, is one that Cavell finds somewhat dogmatic. And, true to form, in response to Malcolm’s – in Cavell’s view – highly questionable use of the notions of criteria and descriptive identity, Cavell initiates his dialectical routine.

Cavell’s “apology” for the skeptical point of view

On my reading, in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ Cavell sets up an imaginary “skeptic” (who this time is an anonymous figure) as the “antagonist” that implicitly *questions* the dogma of OLP, that is, of OLP practiced as Malcolm practices it, and as Cavell – I take it – thinks it should *not* be practiced. In contrast to Malcolm, Cavell asks *why* the skeptic is interested in a numerical rather than a descriptive notion of identity regarding pain. And he finds that the skeptic’s interest has a moral and existential dimension that should not be trifled with. The skeptic wishes to say that my pain is *my* pain, and the contention that there is

²⁶ See [Hammer 02: 19].

nothing to pain beyond what is impersonally captured by description undermines this sense of my-ness. Writes Cavell:

“I know I am in pain” is senseless, Malcolm says. Well, the skeptic realizes that *something* is odd about it, but since he needs it he diagnoses why it seems odd (e.g., it is so trivially true as not to be worth saying except to someone trivial enough to deny it) and then goes on using it. If the anti-skeptic is to penetrate this defense, it can’t be enough to show that it is odd, even very odd, or that the skeptic’s diagnosis of its oddness is wrong. He has to show that its oddness prevents it from recording that fact. Is that what showing that it is “senseless” accomplishes? [Cavell 94: 255]

The skeptics’ intuition about pain – that mine is *mine*, not yours, thus worthy of numerical rather than descriptive identity – might therefore be said to contain something genuinely human, namely a concern with our individuality and separateness, the precariousness of our being-together-in-the-world, the possibility and quality of *community*, while Malcolm’s seems rather theoretically and abstractly motivated. Or as Cavell says, it is motivated by an *a priori* refusal of the skeptic’s point of view – which sounds very much like a *dogmatic* refusal. And, even worse, “The head on effort to defeat skepticism allows us to think we have explanations where in fact we lack them.” [Cavell 94: 258] Therefore, in all fairness, Cavell thinks we owe the skeptic a more sympathetic hearing than Malcolm’s method of grammatical analysis makes possible.

Thus the first stage of the dialectic has been accomplished: The view of OLP that Cavell finds questionable, has been questioned through the skeptic. Of course, as we have consistently maintained, it is part and parcel of this dialectic that Cavell does not agree with the skeptic either. I.e. Cavell rejects the skeptic’s *self-understanding*. Still, Cavell thinks that what the skeptic is saying has enough “truth” in it to serve as a tool for the questioning of certain OLP-prejudices. Hence Cavell’s use of the skeptic as a dialectical proxy should not be taken as an affirmation of skepticism (especially regarding other minds) as a position or theory, but rather as a recognition of the importance of skepticism’s central preoccupation – namely with the issue of the precariousness or vulnerability or inexplicability of our relation to or with the world and each other, something that orthodox OLP has a tendency to gloss over all too easily. Crucially, Cavell’s use of the skeptic as a proxy is an affirmation of skepticism’s suspicion that the issue of our worldly being cannot be resolved in terms of knowledge at all (= knowledge in an *epistemical* sense), including *grammatical* knowledge. However, according

to Cavell, despite this partial insight the fallacy of skepticism is to suppose that our relation with others *should* ideally be resolved in epistemic terms. Thus the dogmatic thesis and the skeptical counter-thesis converge in their tendency to frame our worldly being as a problem of knowledge (including the knowledge of the right use of words.) Hence neither of them is tenable to Cavell.

In view of this one could say that Cavell finds Malcolm's answer to the skeptic, despite its purported basis in "the ordinary", equally *theoretical* in its reliance on as it were "necessary truths" about language. Or, put otherwise, Cavell is apprehensive about what *pictures* (or paradigms) Malcolm is implicitly offering us in his portrayal of criteria regarding "subjective" states. Malcolm invokes a notion of generic sameness apt to capture the gist of examples like: We have the same make of car, or, we have same-colored cars. Here it makes, to be sure, little sense to claim that we are in possession of numerically identical colors or makes of car. But is not *this* kind of picture or paradigm of the "mental" equally problematic as the skeptic's tendency to think of it as some kind of "container" (containing *his* pain)? Is my pain at all equivalent to a make of car? Or is this way of talking as confusing as any?

In consequence, at the end of 'Knowing and Acknowledging' Cavell cautions his reader (of either stripe: skeptic and dogmatic alike) to not take for granted that we know what a, not to say *the*, paradigmatic instance of subjective states might be (in other words, the paradigmatic experience of being a subject):

We don't know whether the mind is best represented by the phenomenon of pain, or by that of envy, or by working on a jigsaw puzzle or by a ringing in the ears. A natural fact underlying the philosophical problem of privacy is that the individual will take certain among his experiences to represent his *own* mind - certain particular sins or shames or surprises of joy - and then take his mind (his self) to be unknown so far as *those* experiences are unknown. [Cavell 94: 266]

Because why, asks Cavell, "should the mind be less dense and empty and mazed and pocked and dotted and why less a whole than the world is?" Thus while Cavell hardly disagrees with Malcolm's negative attitude towards a dualist ontology that postulates the existence of a literally speaking "inner" realm containing pains, he *does* disagree with the semi-behaviorist manner in which Malcolm seeks to overcome those notions.

Cavell's rejection of behaviorism

The “necessary” truths of language, the apodictic criteria that Malcolm uses to dismiss dualism – by grammatically disqualifying the numerical notion of identity of pain etc. – overshoots its target. Ultimately, as Cavell contends, the *behaviorist*-Wittgensteinian approach to the mental practiced by Malcolm and Albritton – and we might add Ryle – ends up denying or *repressing* the subjectivity of the subject (including its individuality). They operate in a reductive fashion that misrepresents what, to Cavell's mind, Wittgenstein has actually written. And here we are, to my mind, at the core of the issue in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging.’ What the argument between the skeptic and the “dogmatic” (Malcolm) has allowed Cavell, is an opportunity to deliver a message of disavowal, one that is *not* primarily directed against the skeptic; rather it is aimed at the doctrines of the likes of Malcolm, Albritton and Ryle, in other words, the orthodox subscribers to OLP who, in Cavell's opinion, misrepresent the “true” spirit of Wittgenstein. Specifically, Cavell thinks that Malcolm and others have an inadequate understanding of the PU §246, where Wittgenstein asks

In what sense are my sensations *private*? - Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it. In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word ‘to know’ as it is normally used, (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain. - Yes, but all the same, not with the same certainty with which I know it myself! It can't be said of me at all, except perhaps as a joke, that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean, except perhaps that I *am* in pain?

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behaviour, for *I* cannot be said to learn of them. I *have* them.

The truth is, that it makes sense to say of other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself.

On Cavell's view this passage should be thought of as concerning primarily the narrowly *epistemic* use of the term “know.” It should not be seen as covering every conceivable “ordinary” use of the word, nor should it be interpreted as a blanket approval of the adoption of an ordinary language philosophy variety of behaviorism. Thus regarding Wittgenstein's remark that “It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain”, Cavell contends that it is only when taken in a certain way that it

...encourages the idea that Wittgensteinian criteria are exclusively behavioural [and] creates the impression that he is a behaviourist. (He isn't a skeptic, so what else can he be?) [Cavell 94: 264]

This contention is followed by a passionate rejection of what Cavell's sees as a general behaviorist trend in the orthodox reception of Wittgenstein's work. I quote at length:

Of course Wittgenstein often denies that a particular feeling or experience is decisive for the application of a concept to others (or to oneself). Never, however, to deny the importance – much less deny the existence (whatever that would mean) – of the inner, but to bring to light false ideas of what is “inner.” Similarly, he often speaks of criteria as consisting in what someone “says and does”; but rarely does he speak of someone's *behavior*. We are sometimes interested in an incongruence between feeling and its expression, but then we are perhaps interested in how someone *acts*; if his *behavior* (e.g., his deportment) is in question, that is not necessarily because his feeling is obscure – on the contrary, it may be obvious – but because it is incongruent with the place he is in. We are often interested in explaining someone's behavior, but we can hardly in general do this by appealing to *those* feelings (the ones expressed by the behavior in question), since what we may have been asking for is precisely an explanation for his feeling that way. [Cavell 94: 265]

In sum, on the Cavellian view, if we accept the Malcolm-Albritton account of Wittgensteinian criteria rather than examining the intricacies of Wittgenstein's texts, we are saddled with (1) what amounts to an “avoidance” (see below for this term) of the subjectivity of the subject, and with (2) a notion of linguistic necessity that avoids the fundamentally finite, hence “uncertain” condition of human discourse. That is, the Malcolm-Albritton view of criteria encourages a problematic ideal of knowledge in our linguistic dealings with ourselves, each other and the world (including in expressing and speaking about our sensations and emotions, such as pain), which amounts to *reinforcing* the skeptical impulse. Accordingly, Cavell contends that

“I know I am in pain” is not an expression of certainty ... it is an expression of pain – it is an exhibiting of the object about which someone (else) may be certain. I might say here that the reason “I know you are in pain” is not an expression of certainty is that it is a response to this exhibiting; it is an expression of *sympathy*. (“I know what you're going through”; “I've done all I can”; “The serum is being flown in by special plane.”) [Cavell 94: 263]

This summarizes the negative analysis in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’, i.e. the dialectical disentanglement of the misrepresentation, by skeptic and dogmatic alike (though in somewhat different ways) of the dilemma of “knowing” pain (one’s own or another’s) as a one-dimensionally *epistemic* problematic. Now, what positive perspective does the essay offer?

Acknowledgement and recognition

Hegelian connections

Clearly, a crucial feature of ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’, as the title suggests, is the introduction of Cavell’s key notion of *acknowledgement*. Cavell brings it into play as follows, continuing the passage just quoted above. “But why is sympathy expressed in this way?” he asks. And the answer is:

Because your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I know (am certain) that you suffer – I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what “(your or his) being in pain” means. Is. (This is “acknowledging it *to* you.” There is also something to be called “acknowledging it *for* you”; for example, I know you want it known, and that you are determined not to make it known, so I tell. Of course I do not acknowledge it the way you do; I do not acknowledge it by *expressing pain*.) [Cavell 94: 263]

This line of thinking invokes an essentially Hegelian notion of *recognition*. Indeed, Cavell’s pairing-off of the issues of acknowledgment and skepticism mirrors the layout of chapter 4 of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. This chapter (titled ‘Self-Consciousness’) divides into two subsections, called respectively ‘Independence and dependence of self-consciousness: Lordship and Bondage’ and ‘Freedom of self-consciousness: Stoicism, Scepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness.’ This embedding of the epistemic problematic of skepticism (self-consciousness) within the context of recognition (lordship and bondage) is truly a turning point, not only in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* – or in the development of consciousness it records – but also in the development of Cavell’s philosophical project. Namely, the *existential* approach to epistemology taken in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ constitutes a turning point regarding how Cavell is bridging the concerns of theoretical and practical philosophy through – following Hegel’s lead – an engagement with the “truth” of skepticism. As Eldridge summarizes the significance of the Hegelian text in question:

In a justly famous, perhaps even notorious, passage at the end of the opening section of Chapter 4, “Self-Consciousness,” of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes that we have reached a great “turning point.” ... What this turning point turns out to involve, very roughly, is the absorption of essentially epistemological questions by essentially political, historical, artistic, and religious questions ... The topics now center around forms of worldly practice in pursuit of the public satisfaction of desire. What is it to live freely? How might agents achieve recognition? What political institutions, forms of art, and religious conceptions that have been developed historically will help us to live freely and to achieve recognition? [Eldridge 03: 8-9]

In other words, what Cavell’s highlighting of the notion of “ac-knowledgment” in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ suggests is a general alignment with the dynamics of Hegel’s conceptual and historical contextualization of skepticism. Namely, according to Hegel, skepticism is symptomatic of the Self coming to consciousness *of itself as a self*, i.e. recognizing itself as an individual. But crucially, skepticism is an essentially *negative* realization of the Self, because the Self – as long as it remains skeptical – is unable to *live out* its new-found individuality in a *community*, that is, to substantially “recognize” itself in the world of others. In a historical perspective, on the account of Hegel, this drama of skepticism is tied to the political circumstances of late Antiquity and the Renaissance, i.e. to the historical conditions pertaining to (a) the rise of republicanism and philosophical thought in the Classical world (the movement from “mythos to logos”), and (b) to the termination of the feudalism of the Middle-Ages (the Scientific revolution, the Reformation, etc.)²⁷ In both periods the Self is seen – by Hegel – as tentatively emerging from dullness and hierarchical *bondage* to fledgling self-awareness and independence. And crucially, this development is, still according to Hegel, expressed in some doctrine of skepticism. Writes Hegel (Phen. §205):

...sceptical self-consciousness thus experiences in the flux of all that would stand secure before it its own freedom as given and preserved by itself. It is aware of this stoical indifference of a thinking that thinks itself, the unchanging and genuine certainty of itself. [Hegel 79: 124]

Yet because the historical conditions were not yet entirely ripe in antiquity and early modernity (that is before political Enlightenment set in in earnest), this emerging consciousness of “separateness” could only inspire frustration in the not-so-*substantially*-(i.e. politically)-independent Self. Meaning that the fledgling independent Self instead of

²⁷ See Forster 89, Chapter I & II: ‘The Superiority of Ancient Skepticism’ and ‘The Limitations of Ancient Skepticism.’

empowerment experiences anxiety and disappointment, provoking a flight to less assertive modes of living, including a flight into its own “interior”. Hence skepticism (in antiquity: stoicism) becomes the intellectual – or “ideological” – expression of a disappointed Self that has taken flight to the reassurances of its own interior. (Cf. Hegel in §206.) Thus the fledgling, self-conscious Self becomes, in Hegel’s words “Unhappy Consciousness,” that is, a consciousness that is not satisfied with itself nor with its relations to others, and compensates by retreating more and more into its own “interior” – and concomitantly, into fantasies or ideologies of an immaculate realm (ultimate reality; say that of Christianity) beyond the imperfections of the present world. (Cf. Phen. §218).

Consequently Hegel’s unhappy or skeptical self is essentially *divided* – divided from the world, and divided within itself. Or alternatively, it is *alienated* vis-à-vis itself and the world/others. This alienating division, on the Hegelian interpretation of the history of philosophy, becomes expressed in the doctrine of the *dualism* of mind and body, mind and world. In short, the life-experience of the unhappy, divided, skeptical self becomes the early modern doctrine of ontological dualism. Hence Cartesian *skepticism* – like its ancient precedents of Stoicism and Christianity – are in the Hegelian perspective expressions of “Unhappy Consciousness.” And in this capacity, Cartesianism becomes “Janus-faced”, both indicative of a truth – “the truth of self-certainty” – and at the other hand indicative of an “untruth”, namely a merely negative resignation to, and obsession with, the certainties of the “inner realm.” Thus Cartesianism is expressive both of historical progress, and of the shortcomings of progress at that point, shortcomings leaving man as it were hanging between the inner and outer realm, as well as between freedom and bondage.

All told, Hegel recognizes skepticism, for all its partialness, as a truthful expression of a fundamentally *human* subjectivity, one that no longer is content with, so to speak, a merely “descriptive” or generic identity but is searching for a *numerical* identity, an identity of its own: Self-identity. However, as Hegel points out, the Self will never find *satisfaction* in its Self-identity as long as it seeks it in narrow epistemic *self-knowledge*. What it takes for the Self to substantially establish its identity is to receive confirmation – recognition or *acknowledgement* – from others *in the publicness of the world*; i.e. the Self must recognize itself in the world through the recognition bestowed on it by others (its equals), which means that it must learn to recognize (acknowledge) *them*. This notion of substantial realization of the Self through the recognition between equals is condensed in the Hegelian concepts of

work and enjoyment. With the fulfillment of the Self in work and enjoyment, notes Hegel in §223, the Self has become *independent*. Only this circle – this wedding band so to speak – of reciprocal acknowledgement between world and subject, Self and Other, equal among equals, can on a Hegelian view heal the existential rupture between the “inner” and “outer”, a rupture or “division” that is (mis)interpreted *epistemically* by the skeptic/anti-skeptic as the difference between knowledge-of-self and knowledge-of-others.

This narrative of the Self’s progress indicates a convergence in how Cavell and Hegel think about subjectivity, objectivity and inter-subjectivity. Indeed, Hegel’s account of the connection between the problematic of skepticism and the issue of recognition prefigures Cavell’s idea of the connection between the “truth of skepticism” and the issue of acknowledgement. Namely, one could say that the very Malcolman epistemical notion of descriptive/generic identity for subjective states (or “outer”, apodictic criteria) in a way parallels the socio-psychological status of *personhood* (or lack of such) supposedly prevalent in a pre-modern society, where notions of “I-ness” and “My-ness” are weak and confused. Accordingly, Cavell more than once portrays early modern times – the age of Luther, Shakespeare, Dürer and Descartes – as marked by a shock-like confrontation between a radically particularized subject and a disenchanted world, where the subject, now an “individual” and a “consciousness”, tries to reestablish contact with the world through the newly current epistemological notions opposing the traditional metaphysical-religious ones – including, as Cavell notes in *The World Viewed*, the newly invented technique of perspectival representation. Thus while to Cavell like to Hegel skepticism is not *unique* to modernity (prefigured as it is by the Stoic varieties), it *is* acerbated and recast by it; this is – to Cavell as to Hegel – symptomatically illustrated by the advent of the specifically *Cartesian* skepticism in early-modern times. As Cavell writes in *Disowning Knowledge* (his collection on Shakespeare), skepticism in the Cartesian form enters history as a “catastrophic” event related to modernity:

The catastrophe is ... the event or advent of skepticism, conceived now as precipitating not alone a structure each individual is driven by, or resists, but as incorporating a public history in the modern period ... with the birth of [Cartesian] skepticism, hence of modern philosophy, a new intimacy, or wish for it, enters the world; call it privacy shared (not shared with the public, but from it). [Cavell 03: 20-21]

Or, as Cavell notes in *The World Viewed*, the modern epoch was marked by a wish

...intensifying in the west since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation – a wish for the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another. [Cavell 79: 21]

Yet equally problematic is the anti-Cartesian “dogmatic” notion of “outer” criteria that in a fashion deprives subjects of their “subjectivity,” making their joys and pains in effect just numbers in a row, like indistinguishable instances of colors or car-makes. Thus skepticism may be symptomatic of the *anxieties* of modernity, but dogmatism is symptomatic of a *denial* of modernity, opting for a pre-modern ontology of unquestioned outerness, what Hegel called “the colorful show of the sensuous here-and-now.” [Phen. §177] Hence, as Cavell suggests in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging,’ the skeptical view of phenomena such as pain *is* in a way more “human” than the one Malcolm is imposing. “I take the philosophical problem of privacy, therefore” writes Cavell in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’

...not to be one of finding (or denying) a “sense” of “same” in which two persons can (or cannot) have the same experience, but one of learning why it is that something which from one point of view looks like a common occurrence (that we frequently have the same experiences – say looking together at a view of mountains, or diving into the same cold lake, or hearing a car horn stuck; and that we frequently do not have the same experiences – say at a movie, or learning the results of an election, or hearing your child cry) from another point of view looks impossible, almost inexpressible (that I have your experiences, that I *be* you). [Cavell 94: 262]

This I take to be a statement to the effect that the “private” realm is not merely to be discarded through a “categorical” analysis (in the sense of Ryle); it is to be *integrated* into the public realm, much as Hegel thought the skeptical consciousness should not be simply eliminated, but integrated into the public sphere of the modern world. We must learn to *master* the subtle interplay between publicness and privacy, or if you want, between community and individuality. Hence Malcolm’s purely “outer” perspective on pain might be said, for lack of a better word, to be in Cavell’s Hegelian perspective more psychologically, sociologically and existentially “shallow” than the skeptic’s. What Cavell calls the “truth” of skepticism is (when rightly understood) the truth about a genuine human *dilemma*. Namely, that in order to be ourselves, we *depend* on our environment and our companions. We are, so to speak, *conditioned* by these. Hence our self-hood depend on something beyond the self, something that we cannot control or, in a rigorous sense, “know.” The self must therefore choose

between a strategy of *avoidance*, where it attempts to safeguard its position by cutting down on its ties to the environment and its companions, and a strategy of *acknowledgement*, where it surrenders to its worldly and social relations in order to enrich its own self-hood.

But none of these are safe bets. In the first case the Self risks impoverishing itself to the point of annihilation. In the second it risks being *disappointed* by the environment and its companions, which would entail a blow to the Self's self-esteem, and thus a challenge to its very self-hood. The skeptic would like to overcome this dilemma by having it both ways: It would like to be both immersed in a worldly community, *and* to command perfect knowledge and control over that community and that world. This would in effect be a solipsistic state of omniscience and omnipotence. But then there would not really *be* any otherness, hence no real way for the subject to achieve recognition from equals. The Self would narcissistically "swallow" the world of others, and nothing would be left *but* the Self. Hence, in conclusion, the need for omniscience and omnipotence which the skeptic expresses as *epistemic* demands for absolute proofs and knowledge can be read as ciphers for a deeply impossible, yet also deeply human wish. As Espen Hammer writes, "On Cavell's view [skepticism] give expression to a deep-seated fantasy or desire to absolve ourselves from the responsibility for making ourselves known to others." [Hammer 02: 68]

Without pressing the analogy with Hegel too far,²⁸ the *Cavellian* answer to the skeptic's predicament is thus that the self must learn to let go of such wishful fantasies, and transcend both (1) an externalist vocabulary of mere *objects* (a dogmatic "Rylean" language²⁹), and (2) the purely self-referring vocabulary of "consciousness" (the language of the Cartesian skeptic), and add to it (3) a practical (in the Kantian-Hegelian sense) idiom of "acknowledgement," which is the language of individuality and responsibility, work and love, relations and relationships.

The bottom line is that such a transcendence of dogmatism and skepticism implies that you must be able to employ the word "pain" both in recognition of your own situation, *and* in recognition of the situation of others. Hence there *is* in a sense a certain symmetry in the first- and third-person uses of the word "pain"; it is a symmetry inherent in the relation of Self and

²⁸ An important difference is that while Hegel focuses on the acknowledgment of other subjects, Cavell is also concerned with the recognition of sensuous particulars. This will become clear in Chapter 6.

²⁹ Compare Sellars' Hegelian criticism of the excessive externalism of Ryle in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.' [Sellars 68]

Other, where being-a-self and being-with-others are seen as complementary. What acknowledgement does is then to *confirm* that complementarity between the subject and the “co-subject.” Hence acknowledgement confirms the *we*-perspective, or the *public* dimension of our individual existence. And this publicness is not necessarily the same as “behaviorism”. Indeed, on this view behaviorist terminology becomes just a reductive *imposition* upon the much more fine-grained language of publicness. As Cavell concludes ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’:

To know you are in pain is to acknowledge it, or to withhold the acknowledgment. – I know your pain the way you do. [Cavell 94: 266]

To recapitulate: On a Hegelian-Cavellian logic, the Malcolmian notion of purely “outer” criteria for subjective states could be correlated with a more “primitive” view (whether seen in relation to the development of humanity or of the individual) of the Self than that of the “skeptic” who, in Cavell’s interpretation in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’, finds such outer/descriptive/generic reductions of subjectivity and identity insufferably shallow. Indeed, if we used genealogical terminology, we could say that the Malcolmian anti-skeptic is like a child or pre-historical (or pre-modern) human that has not yet arrived at full self-consciousness and individuality, while the Cavellian skeptic is more like a modern, self-obsessed adolescent that is not able to reconcile his or her individuality with the demands of worldliness and *community*, i.e. the demands of the grown-up world of work and love, modes of *being* which are neither wholly “inner” (mental) nor merely “outer” (physical), but which in a sense tentatively reconcile the two.

Meaning that while skepticism is clearly not to be *endorsed* on Cavell’s view, neither is it to be lightly dismissed. On Cavell’s view the temptations and obsessions of skepticism is in a way a stage of human development – or an aspect of the human condition, of consciousness under individuality and finitude – that we simply have to face up to in order to become responsible individuals. Consequently, when Malcolm dogmatically dismisses those issues (as Cavell takes him to do in ‘The Privacy of Experience’), through his rendering senseless of skepticism in the name of “apodictic” criteria, I surmise that Cavell finds Malcolm to in effect cut short our human *education* in a detrimental way. By framing his account of criteria as he does, Malcolm has elected to skip over rather than to work through the dilemmas of the human condition. Therefore the moral of the criticism of Malcolm is, as Cavell emphasizes, that we should be aware of the danger that

...the head-on effort to defeat skepticism allows us to think we have explanations where in fact we lack them. [Cavell 94: 258]

In other words, we should be aware of the dangers of false reassurances, what one could call the installation of a “false consciousness” that objectivates our humanity through the imposition of semi-behaviorist jargon in the place of an intersubjective language of acknowledgement. Or using slightly other terms that will resonate below: While Malcolm’s approach *represses* the “trauma” of skepticism, Cavell seeks to remember it, bring the skeptical trauma or wound to the ego back into the light so that it can be worked through.

Therefore, rather than dismissing the skeptic’s line of questioning out of hand, Cavell suggests we should *hear him out*; that is, in a Blochian spirit we should reexamine classical skeptical issues (even fantasies) for their truth-content, letting the associations take their own course – in reflections such as that

We know (it is obvious) that dolls do not have feelings; but it should be no less obvious that dolls also do not exhibit behavior. Whether robots exhibit (creaturely) behavior (forms of *life*) is as much a problem – is perhaps the same problem – as whether they “have” “consciousness.” – But if “behavior” and “consciousness” go together, in their presence and in their absence, how do “outer” and “inner” come apart? [Cavell 94: 265]

And the chain of associations thus unleashed startlingly implicates us, as we shall presently see, in a quintessential Cavellian web of connections between psychoanalysis, existential philosophy, Shakespearean drama, Marxism and eschatology. Indeed, this trajectory, which begins in earnest with ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’, unfolds the panoramic landscape of Cavell’s mature thought.

Learning from the fate of the skeptic

Wider implications of ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’

Cavell’s maneuvering between the positions of Malcolm and the skeptic in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ is prolonged and convoluted. But guided by our central concern – to take stock of the essay’s dialectical structure – we will focus on how the essay ties in with some other central concerns of Cavell’s. To recapitulate: The drama of opposition Cavell has

uncovered in 'Knowing and Acknowledging' through the "dialogue" of the skeptic and Malcolm is the following: The skeptic thinks he has discovered an abiding truth about language, namely that we have no reliable means to ascertain the thoughts and feelings of others on account of what they express. And Malcolm (the dogmatic) believes that he has found another truth – namely that the grammar of the mental at bottom operates with descriptive rather than numerical notions of identity, and thus that the existence of so-called "inner/private" states, such as pain, are after all ascertainable. Or in its ultimate consequence, as Ryle argues in *The Concept of Mind*, there *are* no inner/private states; to call them so is a misconception of their grammar. And Cavell's dialectical response is to reject skeptic and dogmatic alike. Namely:

(1) The skeptic is rejected because his concern with the inner and private is spelled out in a reductively epistemic, Cartesian-dualistic way and,

(2) the dogmatic/Malcolm is rejected because he in his eagerness to do away with dualism represses crucial traits of human existence, such as mine-ness and I-ness, in the name of an abstract grammatical simplification of how we speak (which is needed in order to achieve "apodictic" criteria.)

Cavell resolves this deadlock in terms of his strategy of *Aufhebung*. He rejects both accounts on the grounds that they appeal to a one-dimensional notion of *knowledge* (only seen as it were from two different sides) as the supreme condition of our human existence. Cavell instead offers the basically Hegelian concept of *acknowledgement* as a means to arriving at a viewpoint that both comprises and transcends the skeptical-dogmatic partial "truths." The very term "ac-knowledge", we should note, comprises within itself the term "knowledge," indicating it, as Cavell says, to not represent something fundamentally other than knowledge, but an added dimension or inflection of knowing. In this composite term, we could say, the dimension or "axis" of knowledge is *embedded* within a larger human existential situation. It indicates how knowledge is contextualized by practice, that is, within the substantial concerns of living a human life. And the substantial human concern that is at issue here is how we *recognize* or fail to recognize an other person's *humanity*, or simply, the other person's personhood. The issue that is at stake, to use Cavell's vocabulary, is whether we allow the other's expressions to *count* as expressions of pain, or whether we "avoid" them. Thus the skeptic is wrong because he formulates an existential problem in the same terms as he would

use to formulate a much narrower epistemological-scientific problem. Hence something that *is* a real problem – how we relate to each other – comes out as something that seems like an unreal problem (to everybody but the skeptic.) Yet the orthodox, anti-skeptical practitioner of OLP (Malcolm) is wrong because he thinks that this existential problem can be overcome in terms of a simple grammatical device, and because he uses this device, in effect, to dogmatically dismiss someone who passionately wishes to address the predicaments of our being-together as single, isolatable individuals. In other words, Malcolm is, in his own way, “avoiding” the real issue, the issue of acknowledgement. That is, Malcolm’s grammatical analysis is unenlightening when it comes to our real-life concerns with the dilemma of being potentially “unknown” to each other; with losing and finding each other, losing and finding one self, losing oneself and *being found*. As Cavell remarks:

...this sense of unknownness is a competitor of the sense of childish fear as an explanation for our idea, and need, of God. [Cavell 94: 266]

The skeptic’s are fears and hopes, as Cavell intimates, that ought to be dealt with seriously by any modern form of thought that aims to assume the burdens traditionally shouldered by philosophy in conjunction with art and religion. Yet Malcolm hinders our realization of the problem of acknowledgement, of knowing and being known (which is not to be disassociated from loving and being loved) by practicing a quasi-theoretical cure for our existential dilemmas. However, despite the orthodox Wittgensteinians, Cavell finds those existential issues to be addressed in the work of Wittgenstein himself on ordinary language, staged as a drama of skeptical and dogmatic voices. Thus ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ exposes the irony that the most existentially interesting aspects of Wittgenstein are exactly those that are glossed over and avoided by the orthodox reception of his work. In consequence Cavell firmly positions himself in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ as an interpreter of Wittgenstein that is *not* a skeptic himself, but also one that is not an orthodox “anti-skeptic” either; indeed, Cavell makes it his trademark to insist that the problems of skepticism remains in *some* measure internal (as a dialectical moment) to all of Wittgenstein’s work, i.e. that Wittgenstein never really “dissolves” the problem of skepticism once and for all in terms of a grammatical device. The problem keeps recurring, in ever new forms, because it is an existential one.

Thus ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ is a pivotal essay on several counts. First, it is one of the earliest statements of the tenets underlying Cavell’s mature reading of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*. Second, it builds a bridge from his earliest essays to *The Claim of Reason’s*

idiosyncratic pursuit of the issue of skepticism. Third, it builds a bridge to Cavell's series of works on theatre (and beyond that cinema), most notably 'The Avoidance of Love,' which follows immediately upon 'Knowing and Acknowledging' in the collection *Must We Mean What We Say?* In fact, it is in 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear' that one finds the best statement of a "moral" issuing from the tortuous movement in 'Knowing and Acknowledging.' This evaluation is confirmed by Cavell's retrospective appraisal of the essay 'Knowing and Acknowledging' and the work on tragedy following it:

Acknowledgment became a recurrent theme of my work from the time of its isolation for attention in "Knowing and Acknowledging" and provides, together with the essay that follows it, on King Lear ("The Avoidance of Love") the title of Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* ("Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance"). Its formulation of the skeptic's plight as one which in mortality, let's call it, presents itself as sort of limitation, "a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack" ... is one I invoke periodically in later work where I speak of "the threat of skepticism" as a sort of human compulsion to over-intellectuality (not simply a Faustian desire to know everything but a demonic will to measure every relation against that of knowing), as it were a natural weakness (to say the least) of the creature enamored of its intelligence. [Cavell 02: xxvii]

Specifically, Cavell writes in 'The Avoidance of Love,' an essay that deals with the theme of failing-to-know (read: failing-to-love) in *King Lear*, that the skeptic is neither

...the knave Austin took him to be, nor the fool the pragmatists took him for, nor the simpleton he seems to men of culture and of the world. [Cavell 94: 323]

These words, we could say, demarcate the *perspective* our threading of the dialectical path of 'Knowing and Acknowledging' has left us with or at. I find these words to strongly support my contention that to Cavell, it is not sufficient in dealing with skepticism to dismiss the skeptic with a formula of grammatical analysis, i.e. to appeal to Malcolm's "criteria" or Baker and Hacker's *rules* or for that matter, to Mulhall's linguistic "framework". In other words, it is not enough to teach the skeptic a grammatical lesson; we must allow the skeptic to teach *us* a lesson, a lesson about being human. I.e. to deal productively with skepticism one must understand what (the tradition of) skepticism is really *about*, what it shows to be at stake, what Cavell calls its "truth." And as it turns out, to Cavell the work of Shakespeare, emerging in the same epoch as the epistemology of Locke and Descartes (and the perspectivalism of Dürer one might add), is not external to that tradition. Indeed, in *Disowning Knowledge*, his

collection of Shakespeare-studies, Cavell draws a direct line between the emergence of modern theatre and modern skepticism, writing that his intuition is that

...the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes... [Cavell 03: 3]

Hence to learn from the (ill fate of the) skeptic in effect means to Cavell, as we shall examine more closely in Chapter 7, to learn from Shakespeare's dramatization of skepticism in *tragedy*. Accordingly, Cavell finds in 'The Avoidance of Love' that the skeptic

...forgoes the world for just the reason that the world is important, that it is the scene and stage of connection with the present: he finds that it vanishes exactly with the effort to make it present. If this makes him unsuccessful, that is because the presentness achieved by certainty of the senses cannot compensate for the presentness which had been elaborated through our old absorption in the world. But the wish for genuine connection is there, and there was a time when the effort, however hysterical, to assure epistemological presentness was the best expression of seriousness about our relation to the world, the expression of an awareness that presentness was threatened, gone. If epistemology wished to make knowing a substitute for that fact, that is scarcely foolish or knavish, and scarcely some simple mistake. It is, in fact, one way to describe the tragedy *King Lear* records. [Cavell 94: 323]

Obviously, Cavell is not *recommending* skepticism in this passage. Yet we could say that he is commending it. Cavell is "recognizing" skepticism, that is, recognizing it as a tradition of thought that has *some* "truth" or "sense" to it, rather than being completely senseless, as orthodox OLP maintains. And this underlying, unrecognized truth (i.e. unrecognized by skeptic and anti-skeptic alike) is the same as that of tragedy, at least a certain type of tragedy. The problem is that the skeptic clings to the notion that he has discovered some new epistemological fact, rather than having just pointed to the familiar facts of the human condition, especially as it pertains to the conditions imposed by modernity. Or put otherwise, skepticism, in its epistemological self-understanding, is in effect hiding from its own truth. Skepticism then emerges, in Cavell's analysis, as the "avoidance" of whatever appears *contingent* or uncontrollable to our finite powers (including of judgment), especially in our dealings with others. Which means that this perspective on acknowledgement and avoidance, as Cavell finds it in sources as various as those of Hegel, Shakespeare and Wittgenstein,

resonates to the fundamental tenets of Freudian, Marxist and existential thought, especially as they merge in the Freudo-Marxism of critical theory.

Freudo-Marxist connections:

Alienation and redemption

Already in our initial examination of ‘Austin at Criticism’ we found some cause to suspect that Cavell’s analysis of skepticism has as much to do with psychoanalysis, Marxism and existential philosophy as it has to do with OLP.³⁰ Our examination of his affinity for Hegel merely adds to that suspicion. Indeed, that there is a heavy psychoanalytical precedent involved in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ and related texts such as ‘The Avoidance of Love’, is made evident by the fact that “avoidance,” one of Cavell’s favorite notions, is a technical psychological, even psychiatric, concept. We should not fail to appreciate that Cavell in his writings makes a point of not only referring to Freud, but also to Freudians such as Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott, notable for their work on the schizoid/narcissist pathologies, i.e. pathologies concerning the tendency to withdraw from the world.³¹ The use of the term “avoidance” in the clinical literature vary somewhat, but generally it has to do with how humans relate to what they find *traumatic*. I.e. they avoid it. *The Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Fontana) defines avoidance-behavior in the following terms:

Abient behavior, or withdrawal, liable to increase distance between the subject and a goal (a physical object, a social partner or a situation) ... is displayed in the motor phenomena of flight (escape) and defense, but is also interpreted as an inner ego-protective process (Freud), as an inner process for removal of possibly threatening cognitive patterns (Lazarus) [Eysenck 75].

Freudian repression would thus constitute one form of avoidance-behavior; phobic reactions another one. In short, Cavell speaks as if in skepticism we are faced with a complex of “narcissism” or of the “schizoid position,” where the self is “splitting” – both from itself and from the world (including the splitting of its “object” into good/bad aspects) – in order to

³⁰ Even more, as we discussed initially, behind those modern cultural phenomena stands the powerful structural precedent of messianic eschatology – eschatology being an, if not the, exemplary discourse of alienation and redemption. Presently we shall focus on Cavell’s idiosyncratic appropriation of the Marxist bent of existential psychoanalysis, but we will indicate how his appropriation of that tradition is structurally similar to his appropriation of traditions of eschatology. We shall focus on the latter in Chapter 5, when we come to Cavell’s “Emersonian” moral perfectionism.

³¹ See for example [Cavell 88: 54-55], or the foreword to his *Contesting Tears*.

avoid the traumas of Self-Other relations, a problematic that bears heavily on the Cavellian vision of the skeptical self as an essentially sterile subjectivity facing an unreal, “dead” world. The implication in our Cavellian context being that insight into our human *freedom* (and everything that pertains to it, such as love and knowledge and responsibility) as well as into the limitations of that freedom (our finitude), is *traumatic* to the human subject, which typically reacts by *avoiding* those insights and everything that sparks them, such as intimate relations with others, say, sharing their pain. But the price for this avoidance is that the skeptical self “empties” of substance and in the same gesture kills and banishes the world and its human companions. Hence, one could say, the finite subject is tempted, like King Lear, to “blind” itself to the truth about its condition, but with tragic consequences, as when Lear in his blindness banishes his most loyal friend and causes the death of his most loving daughter.

Reflections on the connection between freedom and responsibility, avoidance and anxiety are fairly standard to the realms of psychoanalysis and existentialism (in the widest sense), not to say to their amalgamation in existential psychoanalysis.³² Perhaps the classical statement of the existential-psychological notion of man’s flight from himself is given in Erich Fromm’s *Escape from freedom* (1941), where Fromm, from a basically Marxist perspective, portrays authoritarianism, destructiveness and “automaton conformity” as the three typical avenues of escape from human freedom and responsibility. The examples could be multiplied, invoking other classics of Freudo-Marxist critical theory such as *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*, *One-Dimensional Man*, and of course, Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*, all centering on the utopian ideas of freedom and reconciliation, and the (internal) betrayal of these ideas by the lapsing into conservatism, totalitarianism or commercialism by a subject (and a society) suffering from existential immaturity, and one might say, blindness.

In other words, if we recall Herbert Marcuse’s criticism of OLP in *One-Dimensional Man*, and if we also recall the implicit answer to that criticism that was essayed by Cavell in ‘Austin at Criticism’, we see that by the time of ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ Cavell has in effect *incorporated* the Freudo-Marxist utopian-eschatological perspective of critical theory into his own version of OLP. Namely, the idiosyncratic approach taken by Cavell to the phenomenon of the “escape from freedom” in *The Claim of Reason* and *Disowning Knowledge*, is to weave

³² Or the related humanistic psychology. See also the work of Ludwig Binswanger, Rollo May, R. D. Laing and others, derived from Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s “diagnosis” of how man avoids his own freedom in a state of “inauthenticity.” The work of J. P. Sartre would of course provide another case in point, not the least in his idiosyncratic “psychoanalysis of things.”

the familiar existential, Marxist and psychoanalytic themes into a tapestry containing Shakespearean drama, ordinary language philosophy and Cartesian skepticism. Thus in the Cavellian “diagnosis” it is a key contention that in a skeptical individual or culture, a “fantasy” manifests itself in a dual anxiety over being *known* and being *unknown*, i.e. a fantasy of either gaining total control over one’s relation to others, or of losing that control utterly. The classical skeptical problematic about “other minds” then becomes to Cavell symptomatic of a certain psycho-social-existential trauma of “publicness.” The wish, Cavell contends

...to deny the publicness of language, turns out ... to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control ... as though if I were expressive that would mean continuously betraying my experiences, incessantly giving myself away; [at the same time] it would suggest that my responsibility for self-knowledge takes care of itself – as though the fact that others cannot know my (inner) life means that I cannot fail to... [Cavell 79: 351-2]

But this is in a way equivalent – and here comes the dialectical turn – to saying that skepticism, in its need for perfect control, not the least in how we make ourselves known to and how we know others, is born out of a utopian wish for an *ideal world*, marked by *harmonious* relations between humans, and between humans and the non-human denizens of the world, comprising say, minerals and plants and animals and works of art, what J. M. Bernstein calls “sensuous particulars.” Which means that to Cavell skepticism is “Janus-faced”: It is both expressive of an alienation from the world and others, and expressive of a hope of redemption of those relations. Hence what is needed is not a “cure” of skepticism (in the sense of Malcolm), but a “redemptive reading” that brings out and works through its “esoteric” utopian implications. Then the sense of alienation can be turned to serve the hope of reconciliation.

This confirms our impression from ‘Austin at Criticism’ that Cavell’s line of thought is roughly parallel to that of Bloch’s in *The Principle of Hope*. This further leads to a notion of “therapy” that combines Freudianism with the tenets of redemptive reading. I.e. the skeptical “problem” – the one that calls for “therapy” – is that the skeptic’s utopian wish is betrayed (or blocked) by its epistemic perversion into a “neurotic” yearning for absolute *certainty*. What the skeptic needs to be reminded of is that his hunger for certainty could be interpreted as

simply a wish for a better life in a better world, a world where he did not feel so lonely and helpless. Hence Cavell, in a Blochian fashion, reads out of the “ideology” or fantasy of skepticism both a “truth” (the utopian yearning for reconciliation) and an “untruth” (its dystopic perversion into epistemology.) In this perspective, we could articulate the Janus-faced nature of skepticism: The utopian wish for a way of relating to others in a spirit of *harmonious community* – love and solidarity – becomes a wish for a way of relating to others in terms of unrestrained *epistemic access* – absolute knowledge. The substitution of Certainty for Love, of Knowledge for Acknowledgement, becomes the primordial sin in Cavell’s philosophy (when interpreted in accord with Blochian theology), and the driving force behind what he abbreviates with the word “tragedy.” Thus skepticism (avoidance) becomes, in Cavell’s view, a failed strategy of escape from, or mechanism of defense against, the trauma of human freedom and responsibility.

But so does, we should note, *dogmatism*, the obsessive rejection of doubt, the insistence that nothing is amiss. In this sense skepticism and dogmatism are symmetric in their avoidance of the problem of *judgment*; the problem of coming to reasonable decisions without the benefit of appealing to absolute or “apodictic” criteria – including in our assessments of the thoughts and feelings of other people, say, in a love-relationship (here Shakespearean tragedy looms, cf. the fate of Othello.) In other words, skepticism and its dialectical twin dogmatism becomes mechanisms of defense against Kant’s admonition in ‘What is Enlightenment’ to *sapere aude*, to dare to think, dare to judge, dare to step out of our “self-imposed immaturity”. In short, skepticism and dogmatism, as rejections of our fallible power of judgment, becomes avoidances of *freedom*.

Thus in Cavell’s analysis of skepticism, as we have already noted, there is an incipient analysis of modernity reminiscent of that which we associate with critical theory. Namely that a society, and a “consciousness”, obsessed with certainty and control is a perversion of what modernity *could* have been: the redemption of mankind’s hopes for a harmonious, reconciled world, where true happiness is possible, that is, where everyone’s needs are *acknowledged*. Instead, through the imposition of artificial abstractions and constraints, both consciousness and the world is “reified”, and thus alienated (divided) from each other, just as the self is divided from itself.

The theatre of the mind

Theatricality and modernity

To Cavell what one could call “alienated knowledge”, knowledge without acknowledgment, is indicative of a *theatrical* relation to the world. Theatricality, to Cavell, is a byword for a lack of *reciprocity* (as between actors and an “unknown” audience) that marks the skeptical relation to the world and others, i.e. a lack of reciprocity characteristic of the alienated *spectator*. This vision of the world as a stage viewed by a spectator connects with the specifically modern notion of the “theatre of the mind” associated with Locke and Descartes. The crux of Cavell’s analysis is that the withdrawal of judgment, under Cartesian radical doubt, to what goes on in the theatre of the mind was intended to insure certain knowledge, but as it turned out, this knowledge was not knowledge of the world, but about “representations.” Thus on Cavell’s analysis, in early modernity the world traumatically receded out of reach just at the moment one was about to grasp it once and for all, causing a disappointed feeling of being left on the “outside” of things.

Consequently, it is on Cavell’s analysis

(1) the very wish to relate to the world in terms of exclusively epistemic categories, that is, in terms of *certainty*, which invites skepticism. Hence it is

(2) the skeptic himself, by his adoption of a certain *picture* of his relation to the world (paradigmatically in terms of a dichotomy between consciousness and the material world, the simile of the theatre of the mind) that creates an oppressive sense of alienation, of a lack of “presentness” to the world.

By closing out the contingent, what cannot be known for certain, the skeptic has closed *himself* out. The problem of skepticism on this formulation then comes down to a failure not as much to “know” as to “acknowledge” the world. Thus, as Cavell writes in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’:

A ‘failure to know’ might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank [Cavell 94: 263-264].

In fear of losing control over his own situation the skeptic has eliminated everything that allows the world to get a contingent “grip” on him, thus depriving himself of a reciprocal grip on the world. There is nothing there in the world to *pull* him into it, to lay claim to him, to drive him forward. The theatre of mind has become an iron cage. The skeptic’s blindness to his connection with others, is in a sense something active, something constructed, an *avoidance*. The “cost,” in the Cavellian terminology, of that avoidance is that the skeptic with his epistemic vocabulary brackets the *substance* of the leading of a human life. The world dies, and the tragic self, no longer able to recognize himself in the Other, and in the world, empties out.

This mad, sovereign Ego surrounded by desolation, resonates with R. D. Laing’s distinction between *ontological security* and *insecurity* in his book *The Divided Self*. Writes Laing, contrasting the existential positions of the “whole” (ontologically secure) and the “divided” (ontologically insecure) self:

A man may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and [substantial] person. As such, he can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally [substantial] Such a basically *ontologically* secure person will encounter all the hazards of life ... from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people’s reality and identity. It is often difficult for a person with such a sense of his integral selfhood and personal identity ... to transpose himself into the world of an individual whose experiences may be utterly lacking in any unquestionable self-validating certainties [Laing 90: 39]

Now, in a Cavellian perspective, it is a further question if we ever *can* become ontologically secure, or if a residual division and uncertainty is part of our finite condition. At any rate, he shares Laing’s conviction that the cost of actually living our skepticism, giving free rein to ontological insecurity, is a sterile life, *emptiness*, what Wittgenstein might have called a lack of “traction”. Inversely, as we have seen, there are costs of non-skepticism; the cost and risk of expressing oneself in a world where one’s expressions can, and frequently are, rebuffed; acting in a world where one’s expectations can be, and frequently are, disappointed. Indeed, the “truth of skepticism” is that a human life implies these risks; hence the skeptic is right in pointing out that the cost of non-skepticism is a radically *non-insured* life, which implies that,

as a finite being, one is always vulnerable to metaphysical-existential anxiety. As Hammer puts it:

No recovery of interest and passion can ever refute skepticism (the sense that each of us is separate, barred as it were, from the world and others); yet upon realizing the precise way in which our existence is both social and natural, or both mental and physical ... the skeptic's vision of confinement may be lifted. [Hammer 02: 29]

Namely, as I understand Cavell, the human condition (as finite beings) is marked by the fact that humans are intrinsically together-yet-separate or separate-yet-together. We are *in* the world, *together* with things and other people, but we *are* not those things and other people. We do not have “direct” access to the things and other people that surround us. To acknowledge the existence of things and other people thus entails acknowledging our separateness from them, yet without – and this is the crux – resorting to painting us as desperately separate as the skeptic does, because that represses whatever vulnerable togetherness we *do* have, risky as it is. Hence, what in clinical terms would be called “separation-anxiety”³³ (pathological “melancholy”) becomes in these philosophical terms a question of anxiety over having to rely on one's finite *power of judgment* in dealing with things and people separate from one self.

This means that Cavell in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ (as well as in *The Claim of Reason* and *Disowning Knowledge*) shifts fluidly between the idioms of Freudianism, Marxism, Hegelianism, existential philosophy, and ordinary language philosophy. It is a potent, but complex combination, one that indicates that the condition of human finitude is equivalent to the standing possibility of skepticism, which is equivalent to the standing “crisis” of having to rely on one's fallible judgment. That is, having to rely on a judgment which one can ultimately only *hope* will harmonize with that of others. Indeed, the “truth” about skepticism the skeptic himself is hiding from, but which “therapy” may entice him to acknowledge, *is* this dependency, for community, on agreement in judgment. Or put another way, continuing the language of psycho-analysis: The skeptic must quit his avoidance of his human condition and learn to “mourn” his loss (one that has always already occurred), of absolute certainty, especially in his dealing with others. I.e. he must overcome his melancholic withdrawal. Thus Cavell conceives, as Hammer remarks

³³ Compare Freud's analysis of “fort-da,” of the child's effort to master the dialectic of absence/presence.

...of the coming-to-be of responsibility for and to the other as presupposing a trauma of awakening whereby our primary narcissism is shattered. In Cavell, this may occur, or be represented, in an indefinite number of ways: as the desire for remarriage, as Kleinian reparation after an initial phase of pre-oedipal aggression, as Freudian hysterical conversion, a Shakespearean tragic insight, as Thoreauian ‘thinking beside oneself in a sane sense,’ and essentially as acknowledgement of the other. [Hammer 02: 145]

To employ psychoanalytic terms: Working through the *ambivalence* of separateness and togetherness (presence/absence) marking the relations of Self—Other, Self—World, the subject can proceed with a less theoretically assured, but also more productive life, uttering the Wittgensteinian phrase “now I can go on.” In that eventuality we might say, in the classic Freudian vocabulary, that the skeptic’s libido (interest, desire) has been released from a neurotic/skeptical obsession with his own interior (his private realm, the theatre of the mind), in order to be invested in the public domain of – in strongly Hegelian terms – work and love.³⁴ In principle there has been a “return” to the world, the world of the everyday, which is the world of what Eldridge calls “the public satisfaction of desire.” [Eldridge 03: 8-9] That is, the subject finds satisfaction of its desire in reciprocal action with/recognition of the world and others. Or, in more Blochian terms, we could say that the repressed *utopian impulse* towards *emancipation* that underpinned skepticism has, at least tentatively, been reclaimed, redeemed or recovered. I.e. the skeptic’s yearning for perfect *knowledge* of the world is recognized for what it is, namely a yearning for a perfect *world*, marked by solidaric rather than solipsistic relations between people. In short: A world of generosity and sensitivity, as represented by our ideals of marriage/friendship. Meaning that to the Freudo-Marxist the skeptic’s feeling of alienation vis-à-vis the “outer world” and “other minds” is ultimately a function of “the wrong state of things” obtaining, rather than of a merely cognitive shortcoming of the human mind.³⁵

Accordingly, we see that in Cavell’s pattern of analysis there is a certain interchangeability between (1) quitting the avoidance of one’s own freedom and responsibility, (2) dealing productively with skepticism, (3) acknowledging the separate existence of things and other people, (4) cultivating the power of judgment, and (4) hoping for reconciliation of Self and Other. This interchangeability is intriguing, but it also points to the basic problem with

³⁴ Cf. Freud’s work on narcissism from 1914 for these terms.

³⁵ Compare Adorno’s notion from *Negative Dialectics* that dialectics is the “ontology” of the wrong state of things.

Cavell's work: The impressionistic style of his discussion, and the way he latches on to other people's discourses (Freudians, Marxists, Christians, etc.) leaves his own specific goals rather indeterminate. We shall pass focus on this predicament in Chapter 9, but it will be seen to crop up again and again, due to the essayistic *openness* of Cavell's project. For now we note a rather firm conclusion: To dismiss skepticism too hastily could in itself be seen as an act of avoidance, similar to what Freud would have called "resistance" to analysis. Thus on Cavell's logic the most hard-boiled "anti-skeptics," loudly proclaiming the self-evident absurdity of skepticism, often turn out to be closet-skeptics. Hence, while obviously not *endorsing* skepticism in 'Knowing and Acknowledging,' Cavell is neither embracing the dogmatic anti-skepticism of a Norman Malcolm. To the contrary, rejecting Malcolm's orthodox grammatical analysis as artificial, Cavell is recommending a much more roundabout (call it patient) route for dealing with the skeptic, something more on the order of an existential psycho-analysis, sometimes with a vague criticism of society thrown in. Hence it is only to be expected that Cavell's view of *Wittgensteinian* "therapy," as opposed to the more orthodox notions prevalent within OLP, is one that presumes neither to solve nor *dissolve* the problem(s) of skepticism. Because, as I understand Cavell, the problem of skepticism is in reality the problem of existence, the problem of being a human being. Hence the therapeutical emphasis is on *unblocking our human potential*, not on "proving" the existence of the world and others, nor on proving these questions literally meaningless. The aim is to become "free", i.e. in some sense *autonomous*, autonomous through overcoming the *divisions* of our hearts and minds, so that we are able to develop our unabridged humanity instead of battling against ourselves.

Indeed, going back to the roots, in the tradition from Paul to Luther this would mean to seek the grace of salvation. In the existential tradition it would mean to strive for a condition of *authenticity*, in other words, to strive to "become who you are." In romanticism it would mean to become "one" with nature and with one's (true) community. In psychoanalysis it would be conceived as a journey towards emotional maturity. In political terms it would mean to struggle for a truly just society – ultimately Marx's "complete redemption of humanity." But these efforts at emancipation implies that we must get around the skeptical and dogmatic "pictures" which our language projects of its own functioning, and thus of our place in the world and relations to others. In short, to redeem our world we must redeem our language. And only thus could we redeem our *self*. Hence all the concerns we have reviewed above devolves, on Cavell's view, to questions of ordinary language philosophy, namely questions of *how we use words*. Ultimately, it seems that to Cavell it is in the liberation of *language* that

the utopian redemption of the ordinary world is figured. (However unclear the relation is between the *figuration* and the *realization* of that redemption.) This is what accounts for the peculiar mixture of the terminology of ordinary language philosophy and eschatology in the work of Cavell. For instance, Cavell writes with approval in *The Senses of Walden* that

A writer in meditation is literally a human being awaiting expression. The writer in *Walden* assumes a larger burden of this waiting than other men may: partly because it is his subject that the word and the reader can only be awakened together; partly because, as once before, there is an unprecedented din of prophecy in the world. Everyone is saying, and anyone can hear, that this is the new world; that we are the new men, that the earth is to be born again; that the past is to be cast off like a skin; that we must learn from children to see again; that every day is the first day of the world [Cavell 92: 59]

In conclusion, our roundabout approach has showed us how ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ is a pivotal work in its connecting of the first handful of essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, early works apparently focusing on “classical” OLP-issues, with the more openly existential concerns of *The Claim of Reason* and the more explicitly historical and ideological analysis in *Disowning Knowledge*. Not to mention the perspectives which have been opened on *The Senses of Walden* and *The World Viewed*, indicating those to be in a sense “utopian” works. It has also prepared the ground for a probing into how Cavell’s dialectical way of composing a text in order to deal with structures of opposition parallels his “dramatic” reading of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, and more generally, how Cavell turns to Wittgenstein in order to find a form of ordinary language philosophy that is able to accommodate what he sees as the persistent “truth” of skepticism. Surveying these strands, we are now in a position to contemplate how they all come together in Cavell’s later work. In other words, we are ready to embark on ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’.

Chapter 4

‘The Argument of the Ordinary’

‘The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and in Kripke’ was one of the Carus lectures given by Cavell in 1988 at a meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, subsequently to be collected in the book *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990.) On its own ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ is a formidable enough text, and combined with its companion pieces it has become notorious for its complexity, interacting in a narrative encompassing Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Plato, Emerson, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Max Ophuls, Saul Kripke and John Rawls, just to mention some key figures. Indeed, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* illustrates the breadth of what could be called Cavell’s mature thought, and ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ indicates the place which Cavell has accorded Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy within this densely woven fabric. Thus ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ is a convoluted text, but with the background we have accumulated, and the dialectical strategy of reading we have developed along the way, I think we will be able map the text out in a fairly perspicuous manner. To be sure, *if* we are able to do so, I will take it as a strong confirmation of the viability of my line of attack.

The first hermeneutical question that has to be put to the ‘Argument of the Ordinary’ – or to its framing – is why, as the subtitle indicates, Cavell chooses to use the occasion of the Carus lectures to engage with Kripke’s Wittgenstein. In the light of our discussion in the preceding chapters, I am ready to suggest an explanation for Cavell’s choice of topic. First we should note that Cavell writes in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ that

I do not think it likely that anything simple is wrong with Kripke’s reading, anyway in a sense I find nothing (internal) at all wrong with it. [Cavell 90: 65]

This bespeaks a rather more conciliatory – call it *patient* – tone towards Kripke than the one characteristically adopted by Kripke’s more orthodox critics.³⁶ “Hence to say why,” Cavell goes on to write about Kripke’s position, “or the sense in which, it is, in my view, nevertheless not right (not true to the *Investigations*) is bound to take time.” [Cavell 90: 65] The reason why this is bound to take time – my hermeneutical hypothesis goes – is that Cavell is concerned not only with showing that *Kripke’s* interpretation is wrong; he is also concerned with showing how Kripke reveals the misconceptions of certain *other* interpreters of Wittgenstein. Thus the reason that Cavell’s criticism of Kripke is so convoluted – i.e. so time-consuming – in setting up, is that Cavell’s criticism of Kripke is not couched in the orthodox Wittgensteinian terms, but rather designed to illuminate a problematic that extends beyond Kripke’s rather eccentric understanding of Wittgenstein, and into the more orthodox readings.³⁷

Namely, in keeping with the strategy of reading Cavell we have practiced hitherto, I suggest that Cavell in effect is using Kripke’s interpretation of the PU in *On Rules and Private Language* as an occasion to engage not a single philosophical position, but a dialectical *constellation* of positions, including those of more orthodox Wittgensteinians. To sort this assertion out, we need to take a look at what Cavell proceeds to say in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary:’

In taking rules as fundamental to Wittgenstein’s development of skepticism about meaning, Kripke subordinates the role of criteria in the *Investigations*, hence appears from my side of things to underrate drastically, or to beg the question of, the issue of the ordinary ... In my seeing criteria as forming Wittgenstein’s understanding of the possibility of skepticism, or say his response to the threat of skepticism, I take this to show rules to be subordinate; but since Kripke’s interpretation of rules seems, in turn, to undercut the fundamentality of the appeal to the ordinary, my appeal to criteria must appear to beg the question from his side of things. These positions repeat the sides of what I will call the argument of the ordinary, something I will take as fundamental to the *Investigations*. It

³⁶ Compare Baker & Hacker’s contention that Kripke’s position constitutes “conceptual nihilism, and, unlike classical scepticism, it is *manifestly* self-refuting. *Why* his argument is wrong may be worth investigating (as with any paradox), but *that* it is wrong is indubitable. It is not a sceptical problem but an absurdity.” [Baker 84: 6]

³⁷ For a fairly “standard” rejection of Kripke independent of the one by Baker & Hacker see ‘Wittgenstein and the “Skeptical Paradoxes”’ by W. W. Tait in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 83, No. 9. (Sep., 1986), pp. 475-488. See also ‘Paradox and Privacy: On §§201-202 of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*’ by Edward H. Minar in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 54, No. 1. (Mar., 1994), pp. 43-75.

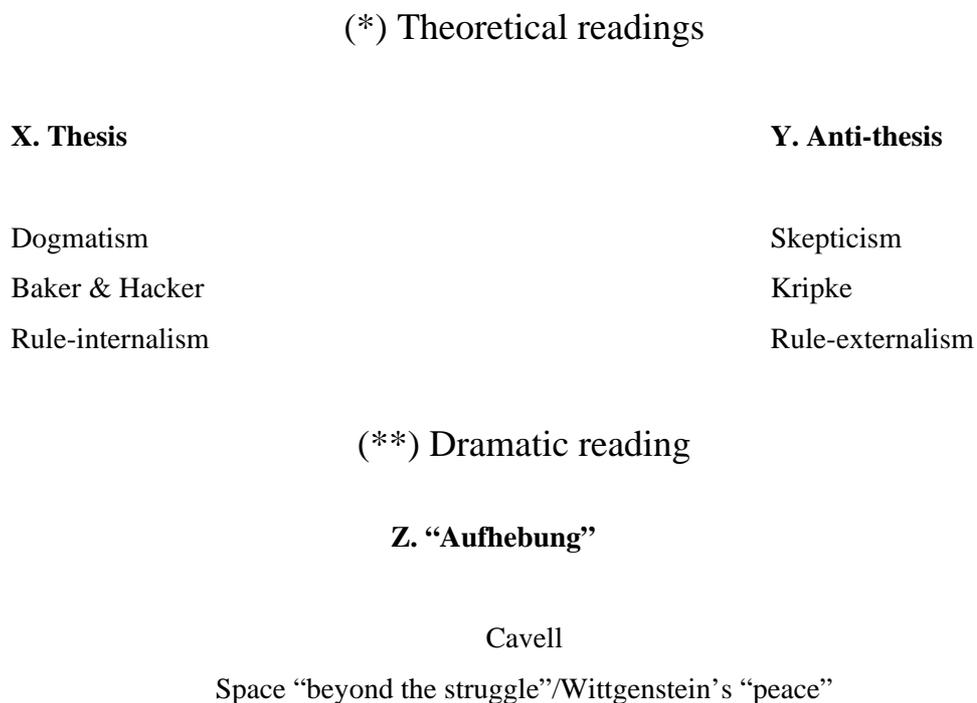
is an argument I seek a way out of, as I suppose the *Investigations* does in seeking to renounce philosophical theses. [Cavell 90: 65]

Now, what is this “argument” of the ordinary? As Cavell says, it is an argument that has two sides. Call them (*) and (**) – the latter we associate with Cavell, the former with Kripke. And further, in keeping with the last lines of the quote above, we could say that side (*) is marked by the fixation on pinning down the ordinary – including everyday language – in some kind of “theory” (focusing on rules), while the other side is geared towards a “non-theoretic”, non-rule-oriented understanding of ordinary language. This may seem clear enough. What is not so obvious, but which I think our discussion in the previous sections invite the consideration of, is the following. Namely, Kripke is hardly alone in his endeavor to formulate a rule-oriented “theory” of everyday language based on the PU. If anything, Kripke is rather isolated in his unorthodox, “skeptical” approach to the problematic of rule-following. In other words, the mainstream Wittgensteinianism from Malcolm/Albritton to Baker/Hacker is far more representative of the rule-following approach to the PU than the lonely and eccentric figure of Kripke. Why are Malcolm and his fellows not included in the argument? Does Cavell deem them to carry no relevance to the problematic? Hardly. So why is Kripke picked from the crowd? Why – in what capacity – is he being singled out?

This puzzle leads me to the following suggestion: In order to make sense of Cavell’s rendering of the “argument” of the ordinary, we should split the rule-following side (*) into two *dialectical halves*, the one represented by Baker & Hacker, as the heirs to the Malcolm/Albritton-line, the other represented by Kripke, the most notorious challenger to that line. We could then say that these two dialectical halves or poles (Baker & Hacker vs. Kripke) engage each other in a “see-sawing” process of structural *over- and under-determinations of language*. By this I mean that Kripke (skeptically) argues that language has no intrinsic order at all, while Baker and Hacker (dogmatically) argue that language has a total intrinsic order (i.e. is totally self-determining), views which I shall, respectively, call “rule-externalism” and “rule-internalism”. Further, in harmony with how we so far have been interpreting Cavell’s dialectical style, Cavell’s *own* view emerges as the “Aufhebung” of the dialectically opposing poles constituted by Baker & Hacker and Kripke’s readings of the PU. Hence, in my reading of ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’, Cavell is implicitly aligning his own dialectical overcoming of the oppositions obtaining between various skeptical/dogmatic ways of over- and under-determining everyday language with how – as Cavell sees it – Wittgenstein in the

PU is staging a dialogue between masks or voices, playing various observations about language against each other, ultimately “seeking to renounce philosophical theses” altogether [Cavell 90: 66], i.e. to find *peace*. This reading suggests a *triangular* dynamic in Cavell’s argument of the ordinary, comprising two dialectical poles/halves of side (*) – call them X and Y, dogmatic thesis and skeptical anti-thesis – facing the *Aufhebung* of side (**); call it Z. This gives us the following structural representation of what I take to be the underlying set-up of Cavell’s ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’:

Fig. 1. Diagrammatic mapping of the Argument of the Ordinary/the dialectical drama of the PU



To recapitulate: In CH&UH we come upon a fully developed Cavellian essayistic methodology supervenient upon a constellation of positions dialectically opposing each other, along with a fully developed correlation of this mode of essayistic composition to Cavell’s reading of the PU. And, as I have suggested, in the case of ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ the figure that is cast as the “antagonist” of orthodox OLP is readily identifiable: It is Saul Kripke, defender of the “skeptical paradox” of the PU. In other words, Kripke is put by Cavell in the rhetorical-dramatical position of the “skeptic” vis-à-vis the more “dogmatic” ways of reading Wittgenstein.

Thus, in reply to my initial query: The reason that Kripke is picked out for special treatment above all other rule-theoreticians is that he *is* no “orthodox” Wittgensteinian rule-theoretician. Kripke is the dialectical odd man out. Hence we could say that Kripke becomes as much of a “representative” (proxy) for some of Cavell’s own unorthodox concerns, as for the concerns of mainstream proponents of the notion of rule-following. This ambivalent position of Kripke’s is what makes him a useful “tool” in Cavell’s effort of criticizing orthodox ordinary language philosophy and Wittgensteinianism from within. Indeed, that Kripke is being singled out by Cavell to be his “skeptical” proxy in the questioning of OLP, is indicated by Cavell’s contention early in the ‘Argument of the Ordinary’ that

Kripke’s is the only account I know other than that in *The Claim of Reason*, that takes *Philosophical Investigations* not to mean to refute scepticism but, on the contrary, to maintain some relation to the possibility of scepticism as internal to Wittgenstein’s philosophizing. [Cavell 90: 65]

With these words Cavell has established a limited affiliation between his views and those of Kripke, enough to grant that there is some “truth” to what Kripke is saying, sufficient truth, in fact, to make a relevant challenge to the orthodoxy the deviance from which they share. Yet at the same time, as this dialogical-dialectical genre of presentation requires, Cavell does not actually agree with his proxy either. This is explicitly confirmed when Cavell declares that despite their affinities

If Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein is right, then mine must be wrong. [Cavell 90: 65]

The last two quotes define the boundary-conditions of Cavell’s understanding of his relation to Kripke, and I take them to consolidate Kripke’s status (in my specific understanding of that role) as the skeptical antagonist in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary.’ And, if Kripke is the antagonist, at whom is his antagonism directed? Who is the “dogmatic” in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’? The dogmatic position in question in *this* case, I presume, is basically the same as it was twenty years earlier in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’, what is sometimes called the “Malcolm-Albritton” view of OLP. [Hammer 02: 39] Specifically, I think we can make an educated guess that the position that Cavell’s proxy (Kripke) is opposing is the view of Wittgenstein espoused by Malcolm’s theoretical descendants, Baker and Hacker. Hence on

my view the problematic from ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ has been moved one generation down the line in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary.’

One significant reason that I think this is a plausible interpretation is that the antagonism between the positions of Kripke and Baker & Hacker is well-known, not the least because of the book *Scepticism, Rules & Language* (1984) which Baker and Hacker published with the explicit aim of discrediting Kripke’s *Wittgenstein: On Rules and Private Language*. Thus prior to the launching of Cavell’s ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ at the APA-meeting in 1988, a pattern of opposition was already established between Kripke and the “orthodox” OLP represented by Baker and Hacker. It does therefore not seem implausible to adduce that Cavell is employing this already established pattern of opposition for his own dialectical purposes. Needless to say, the convenience for Cavell of using Kripke as a proxy against Malcolm and his philosophical descendants, such as Baker and Hacker, becomes all the greater exactly because, as Cavell notes, “Kripke’s is the only account I know other than that in *The Claim of Reason*, that takes *Philosophical Investigations* not to mean to *refute* scepticism but, on the contrary, to maintain some relation to the possibility of scepticism as internal to Wittgenstein’s philosophizing.” [Cavell 90: 65, my italic]

All told, Kripke emerges as the perfect candidate for a dialectical proxy in the questioning of the orthodoxy of OLP, an orthodoxy that maintains, contrary to what Cavell believes, that some relation to the possibility of skepticism is *not* internal to Wittgenstein’s philosophizing. Because the crowning achievement of Wittgenstein – the orthodoxy argues – is to render skepticism *senseless*, to invalidate its very line of inquiry. Mocking the idea that Wittgenstein had any constructive use for skepticism, Baker and Hacker write that

It would be very surprising to discover that [Wittgenstein] who throughout his life found philosophical scepticism nonsensical, a subtle violation of the bounds of sense, should actually make a sceptical problem the pivotal point of his work. It would be even more surprising to find him accepting the sceptic’s premises, the ‘doubts at bedrock’, rather than showing that they are ‘rubbish’. [Baker 85: 5]

In consequence of the above, I take it that we have established, at the outset of ‘The Argument of the Ordinary,’ the implicit presence of the dialectical pattern that we have familiarized ourselves with in the reading of ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ and ‘Knowing and Acknowledging.’ (As well as of ‘Austin at Criticism’, cf. Chap. 1.) Implicitly, Baker and

Hacker – and further in the background, Malcolm/Albritton *et al.* – are the dogmatists, and Kripke is their skeptical antagonist. Both parties hold partial, mutually exclusive “truths” about Wittgenstein, complementing each other as thesis and anti-thesis. And true to the genre Cavell does not endorse either of their *positions*; rather, he is about to take us on a dialectical journey that will lead us to a viewpoint that transcends the skeptical and the dogmatic positions alike.

But before we embark on that journey we ought to clarify the pattern of opposition between Kripke and orthodox OLP that constitutes the point of departure for our dialectical ascent. In other words, we must review the controversy between Kripke and Baker & Hacker. To distinguish between the views of Kripke and Baker & Hacker, I label their positions, respectively, “rule-externalism” and “rule-internalism.” With these labels I mean to indicate: (1) That both parties try to extract from the PU a theory of language based on the notion of *rules*. (2) That their views display a crucial difference in the assessment of how the applications of these rules are judged correct or incorrect. To make a preview we could say that:

(i) Baker & Hacker regard linguistic rules as essentially “self-validating.” That is, the validation of the application of a rule is internal to the rule-following itself. They explain the germaneness of this view to Wittgenstein’s conception of grammar in the following terms:

What counts a priori as grounds for or proof of a proposition is laid down in grammar. And it is a cardinal principle of Wittgenstein’s philosophy that there is no such thing as justifying grammar by reference to reality. Grammar (logic) is antecedent to truth. It delimits the bounds of sense; hence any description of reality put forward to justify grammar presupposes the grammatical rules. And since *nothing* lies beyond the bounds of sense but nonsense, then its ‘description’ cannot justify drawing the boundaries thus. Grammar is autonomous. Hence sceptical doubt whether what is laid down in grammar as grounds for a proposition are really adequate grounds is not merely unjustified, it is literally senseless. For a denial that such-and-such is a ground disrupts an internal relation, and hence robs the allegedly doubtful proposition of (part of) its meaning. [Baker 85: 99]

According to Baker and Hacker, to learn to follow a rule *is* to learn how to follow it correctly; it is the rule itself that determines what is a correct application of it, nothing “external” to it. To think otherwise invites confusion, Baker & Hacker maintain in *Scepticism, Rules & Language*, claiming it to be “evident” that all skeptical questions about the validity of rule-

following “rest on a tacit, inchoate assumption that the relation between a rule and what constitutes acting in accord with it is *external* [i.e.] it is assumed that to determine such-and-such acts or applications as being in accord with the rule is an *external* property of whatever it is that does so determine these consequences.” [Baker 85: 95] As Richard Eldridge summarizes this view:

Baker and Hacker hold that there are internal relations between rules and accordant performances. Once internal relations are in place, then everything is settled (skeptical questions cannot arise), and without internal relations there are no rules. [Eldridge 97: 209]

(ii) Against this, Kripke’s view stands in stark contrast.³⁸ According to Kripke in *On rules and private language*, there is no such thing as a correct-application-of-a-rule-in-itself. Correctness of rule-following cannot be entirely internal to language. Something more must be taken into account, and that is *community*. “[I]f one person is considered in isolation” argues Kripke, “the notion of a rule as guiding the person who adopts it can have no substantive content.” Because, Kripke continues

As long as we regard him as following a rule ‘privately’, so that we pay attention to *his* justification conditions alone, all we can say is that he is licensed to follow the rules as it strikes him. This is why Wittgenstein says, ‘To think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’; otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.’ [Kripke 82: 89]

Rules, qua something that can be followed correctly or incorrectly, are constituted in a societal fashion. That is, the *validation* of rule-following is external to the rule itself, according to Kripke, hence my choice of the term *rule-externalism* to describe Kripke’s position.

In order to appreciate the subtleties of Cavell’s reasoning in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’, it is important that we gain a firm understanding of what is at stake in Kripke’s account, and exactly how it is at odds with the orthodox line of Wittgensteinianism from Malcolm/Albritton to Baker/Hacker. Especially we need to understand (a) what Kripke means by the “skeptical paradox” of the PU, and how it, in *his* eyes, justifies what he calls a “skeptical solution,” and (b) why Baker & Hacker dismiss the very existence of this purported

³⁸ Or “Wittgenstein’s argument as it struck Kripke”; see [Kripke 82: 5].

paradox. The reason it is so imperative that we have this constellation of claims and counter-claims lucidly in mind, is that Cavell in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ dialectically plays these claims and counter-claims against each other, only to ultimately reject either side in favor of his own view. Thus if we fail to keep track of the underlying antagonism between Kripke (the skeptical challenger) and Baker & Hacker (the orthodoxy), it is extremely easy to lose track of the dialectical argument Cavell is superimposing upon it, as if from a vantage-point “beyond this struggle.” I therefore ask for patience as I trace out the pattern of opposition between Kripke and Baker & Hacker in some detail.

The crucial point that should be born in mind is that this tracing out of the dialectic between Kripke and Baker & Hacker ultimately amounts to a tracing out of the dialectic that Cavell ascribes to the PU itself. Thus in the ensuing pages we are *already* engaged in the argument of the ordinary that, according to Cavell, the PU dramatically enacts.

I. Rule-externalism: Kripke’s “Skeptical Paradox”

The point of departure for Kripke’s analysis is what he calls the “skeptical paradox” of the PU, namely, in the words of §201:

This ways our paradox: No course of action [= use of a word] could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made to accord with the rule.

Apparently this passage flies directly in the face of B&H’s view that according to Wittgenstein, the application of a word is, and has to be, determined internally by the rules of grammar. Yet it should be noted in defense of Kripke’s reading that the concern expressed in §201 is not isolated, but is voiced after a steadily deteriorating attempt at specifying exactly what a rule *is*. Namely, there is a recurrence of unresolved exchanges (between two “voices”) concerning a pupil’s continuation of a series (grasping its rule of generation), such as the following in §186:

“What you are saying, then, comes to this: a new insight – intuition – is needed at every step to carry out the order ‘+n’ correctly.” –To carry it out correctly! How is it decided what is the right step to take at any

particular stage? – “The right step is the one that accords with the order – as it was *meant*.”

And remarks such as in §198: “But how can a rule shew me what I have to do at *this* point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule.” Thus if we read with Kripke, we could easily be led to assent to the following story. Namely that (a) Wittgenstein early in the PU introduces the concept of rule-following in order to break the hold of a certain conception of word-object correspondence (the “picture-theory” of truth and meaning), but (b) it subsequently transpires that this conception of rule-following is hard to develop in a coherent manner. This leads in Kripke’s reading to the conundrum of §82, where the point is made that “the rule by which he proceeds” can be understood in so many ways that the notion in the end seems to lose all meaning. Indeed, “What do I call ‘the rule by which he proceeds’?” Wittgenstein asks in §82, proceeding to suggest some alternatives:

– The hypothesis that satisfactorily describes his use of words, which we observe; or the rule which he looks up when he uses signs; or the one which he gives us in reply if we ask him what his rule is? – But what if observation does not enable us to see any clear rule, and the question brings none to light? – For he did indeed give me a definition when I asked him what he understood by ‘N’, but he was prepared to withdraw and alter it. – So how am I to determine the rule according to which he is playing? He does not know it himself. – Or, to ask a better question: What meaning is the expression ‘the rule by which he proceeds’ supposed to have left to it here?

It is hard not to read this paragraph, pace Kripke, as indicating that the notion of rule-following, which in the beginning of the PU appeared intuitively clear and liberating, is unraveling. In effect, do we not need rules to tell us how to apply our rules? Rules that tell us what rules are relevant in a given situation? And so on ad infinitum? These concerns are registered in §84, where the possibility of an infinite regress is made explicit:

I said that the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules. But what does a game look like that is everywhere bounded by rules? whose rules never let a doubt creep in, but stop up all the cracks where it might? – Can’t we imagine a rule determining the application of a rule, and a doubt which it removes – and so on?

If Wittgenstein here really *is* saying that “the application of a word is *not* everywhere bounded by rules” [my italic], what credibility is left to B&H’s interpretation of the PU to the effect that the meaning of a word *is* secured by there being rules that completely and consistently

govern their application? The question seems valid, because §84 is not the only place that such apparently fundamental doubts about the notion of rule-following are voiced in the PU. In keeping with Kripke's perspective, the problem of what determines the *right* application of a rule surfaces and resurfaces in the paragraphs leading up to §201. Taking stock of this situation, Kripke concludes that the paradox of §201 is a real one: No course of action (= use of a word) *could* be determined by a rule, because *every* course of action can be made to accord with the rule on some interpretation of it.

Consequently Kripke, taking for granted that the "skeptical paradox" of §201 is genuine, proceeds to present what he sees as Wittgenstein's "skeptical solution" to it. And the solution, Kripke argues, hinges on the realization that what is wrong with the way rule-following has been treated up until §201 is that the element of *community* has not been taken sufficiently into account. I.e. in response to the dilemma of §201, Kripke makes the radical move to dismiss (or interpret Wittgenstein as dismissing) isolated action as a real instance of rule-following. Implying that for isolated persons there *is* no substance to the idea of following a rule at all, which is what, according to Kripke, is recorded in §201. To bring out the justification of this move, Kripke defines a function "quus", which yields what he calls "quaddition." We can denote quus by the symbol #, and it is defined as follows:

$$x \# y = x + y \text{ if } x, y < 57, 5 \text{ if not.}$$

Hence $1\#2=3=1+2$, $5\#5=10=5+5$, $11\#13=24=11+13$, $10\#30=40=10+30$, etc. But $57\#58=5$, which is not the same as $57+58$, and here the trouble starts, at least according to Kripke. Because the implied question is: If we never before have manipulated numbers exceeding 56, how do we *know* that we have been doing addition rather than quaddition? Meaning: how do we know which rule we have been using? How do we determine this all by ourselves, considering that we might have undergone, say, amnesia or a hallucination without realizing it? That is, as opposed to knowing which *results* we have obtained previously, how do we know which *rules* we have been using? For instance, if I look at a sheet of paper recording the outcome of my calculations involving numbers less than 57, how do I know if I have been adding or quadding? I.e. if I in retrospect perused the following table of correlations (call it "→"):

$$\begin{array}{l} 1, 2 \rightarrow 3 \\ 5, 5 \rightarrow 10 \end{array}$$

11, 13 → 24
10, 30 → 40

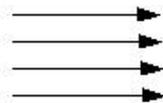
How would I know which rule of correlation I had been using at the time of the table's compilation? In other words, how do I ascertain which way-to-go-on it is that the rule or sign or "sign-post" of → is indicating? It could be plus, and it could be quus. Writes Wittgenstein in §85, continuing the argument from §84: "A rule stands there like a sign-post", and he proceeds to query:

— Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one? — And if there were, not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk marks on the ground — is there only one way of interpreting them?

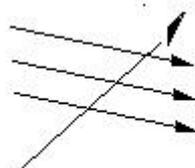
Considering this, how is → to be understood in the table above? Let us look at another example from the PU in order to put the question into perspective. Wittgenstein suggests in §86, outlining a similar set-up as the one Kripke is imagining regarding "quus" and "plus," that we should:

Imagine a language-game ... played with the help of a table. The signs given to [person] B by A are now written ones. B has a table, in the first column are the signs used in the game, in the second pictures of building stones. A shews B such a written sign; B looks it up in the table, looks at the picture opposite, and so on. So the table is a rule which he follows in executing orders. — One learns to look the picture up in the table by receiving a training, and part of this training consists perhaps in the pupil's learning to pass with his finger horizontally from left to right; and so, as it were, to draw a series of horizontal lines on the table.

Suppose different ways of reading a table were now introduced; one time, as above, according to the schema:



another time like this:



or in some other way. – Such a schema is supplied with the table as the rule for its use.

Can we not now imagine further rules to explain this one? And, on the other hand, was that first table incomplete without the schema of arrows? And are other tables incomplete without their schemata?

Let us now return to Kripke's example. In view of such considerations as the ones spelled out in the paragraph just quoted (§86), how do I know if I had continued my calculations beyond values for $x, y < 57$ at *that* time (the time of the actual compilation of the table → above), that calculations would not have started to yield the value 5 rather than $x+y$? I.e. how do I know that I had not been using another rule all along, prior to that point, such as the rule "quus"? And if we are not sure of which rule we *have* used, how could we be sure of which rule to *go on* using? Does following rules from day to day demand that we continuously be aware of them (even in our sleep)? So that I can constantly assure myself: I am following *this* rule *now* and *now* and *now*... That seems untenable. Therefore, concludes Kripke, there *are* no "truth conditions or facts in virtue of which it can be the case that [one] accords with [one's] past intentions or not." [89] In short: Adopting (at least apparently) the logic of Wittgenstein's own examples and thought-experiments in the PU, Kripke is first inserting a wedge between (a) the question of knowing how to follow a given rule, and (b) the question of knowing *which* rule to follow in a given situation (e.g. should a certain table be read horizontally, vertically or diagonally?) But then the dilemma in (b) works to undermine our confidence in (a), because if we do not know *which* rule we are following/ought to continue following, one could ask if we know how to follow *any* rule in the first place. Kripke thinks this line of questioning goes to show one thing, namely that

The important problem for Wittgenstein is that my present mental state does not appear to determine what I *ought* to do in the future. [Kripke 82: 56]

This Kripke understands to be the essence of Wittgenstein's "private language argument." I take Kripke to mean that in social isolation, rules represent no real *constraint* on the action of the subject. On the contrary, as Kripke says, on an individual (private) basis, the subject is "licensed" to follow a rule exactly as it "strikes" him or her. This conclusion is the outcome of Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein's passage about reaching bedrock: "If 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.” [§217] Accordingly Kripke contends in *On rules and private language* that

If our considerations so far are correct, the answer is that, if one person is considered in isolation, the notion of a rule as guiding the person who adopts it can have *no* substantive content. There are, we have seen, no truth conditions or facts in virtue of which it can be the case that he accords with his past intentions or not. As long as we regard him as following a rule ‘privately’, so that we pay attention to *his* justification conditions alone, all we can say is that he is licensed to follow the rules as it strikes him. This is why Wittgenstein says, ‘To think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’; otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.’ (§202) [Kripke 82: 89]

If we accept Kripke’s argument, we are therefore obliged to turn to a scenario where rule-following is considered as a communal phenomenon. In this scenario, Kripke imagines that everyone follows rules just as it “strikes” them, and that they judge each others’ rule-following according to how they themselves would have been struck by the rules. Simply, on this model, we deem (judge) someone else’s application of a rule to be correct if it agrees with our own “inclination.” And, as Kripke stipulates,

These inclinations ... are to be regarded as primitive. They are not justified in terms of [the] ability to interpret [one’s own] intentions or anything else. [Kripke 82: 91]

The crux of the matter is that Kripke assumes that if everyone judges everybody else’s rule-following according to their own inclinations, there will *emerge*, as if by the action of an “invisible hand”, a coherent practice of rule-following transcending the inclinations of any individual. According to this way of thinking, the normativity of rule-following, or *justification*, is a secondary phenomenon arising out of everybody merely responding to their own inclinations and judging others according to the same.

The main piece of evidence Kripke submits in favor of this assumption of emergent coherence is that such coherence *actually exists* in practice. On the whole, our inclinations *do* agree with each other. In other words, as Kripke sees our lives together, the *majority* of people, in the *majority* of cases, agree with each others’ inclinations, and thus contribute towards stable rule-following practices, and thus to substantial concepts of “right” and “wrong.” And the *minority* of people, in the *minority* of cases, which do *not* agree in their inclinations with the

majority can be dealt with in terms of either *correction* (if the aberration is small), and *exclusion* (if the aberration is great.) “Those who deviate” it is stated in *On rules and private language*, “are corrected and told (usually as children) that they have not grasped the concept [say of] addition. One who is an incorrigible deviant in enough respects simply cannot participate in the life of the community, and in communication.” [Kripke 82: 92] Kripke’s story as to what the PU is all about is therefore simple. “A sceptical problem is posed, and a sceptical solution to that problem is given” he writes. “The solution” Kripke concludes,

turns on the idea that each person who claims to be following a rule can be checked by others. Others in the community can check whether the putative rule follower is or is not giving particular responses that they endorse, that agree with their own. The way they check this is, in general, a primitive part of the language game; it need not operate the way it does in the case of ‘table’. ‘Outward criteria’ for sensations such as pain are simply the way this general requirement of our game of attributing concepts to others work out in the special case of sensations. [Kripke 82: 101]

Yet this “skeptical solution” to the “skeptical paradox” – elegant on its own terms – is to go far from unchallenged by more orthodox Wittgensteinians.

II. Rule-internalism:

Baker and Hacker’s rejection of the “skeptical paradox”

Baker and Hacker repudiate Kripke’s “skeptical solution” for the wholesale reason that they reject that the “paradox” that motivates Kripke’s argument even exists, in the PU or anywhere else. To make their point, Baker & Hacker devote the bulk of their book *Scepticism, Rules & Language* to the debunking of Kripke’s claims in *On Rules and Private Language*. Baker and Hacker rather pointedly submit that Kripke’s “skeptical solution” is due to a thoroughgoing misunderstanding of Wittgenstein. Contrary to Kripke, and in accord with Malcolm/Albritton, they argue that Wittgenstein consistently and unproblematically found (and satisfactorily demonstrated) skepticism to be *nonsensical* in his later work. In other words, according to Baker & Hacker the mature Wittgenstein exposed the propositions of skepticism as *grammatical* non-starters, violations of the assertability-conditions of factual statements. In view of this, Baker and Hacker hold that a skeptical solution such as Kripke’s is simply not needed. The problem he responds to is imaginary, both in Wittgenstein’s work and otherwise. We do not need to “check” language externally because language contains its *own* checks;

this Baker and Hacker take to be Wittgenstein's message in the PU. Accordingly Baker and Hacker's most strident criticism against Kripke is that *his* skepticism, which they call "rule-scepticism," is not even directed against such traditional targets as the "outer world" or "other minds"; it is the existence of linguistic meaning as such that Kripke in effect doubts, something they find to be self-refuting.

This extremism, Baker and Hacker contend, which makes Descartes' "radical" doubt seem conservative in comparison, leaves Kripke open to a *reductio ad absurdum* of his position:

Rule-scepticism runs off the trails at the very outset by treating the question of what acts are in accord with an understood rule as an open one. In sober truth, to understand a rule is to know what acts would count as compliance with it, just as to understand a statement is to know what would be the case if it were true. In overlooking this internal relation between rules and their applications, rule-scepticism is shown to be as firmly rooted in conceptual confusion as are familiar, venerable forms of scepticism. [Baker 85: xiii]

While they think that all forms of skepticism has its roots in conceptual confusion, rule-scepticism is in the eyes of Baker and Hacker even *more* confused than the more "venerable" forms of skepticism, the ones to be associated with say, Descartes and Hume. In fact, Kripke's skepticism is not venerable at all. Baker & Hacker go so far as stating that Kripke's position is really not "skepticism at all, it is conceptual nihilism, and, unlike classical scepticism, it is *manifestly* self-refuting. *Why* his argument is wrong may be worth investigating (as with any paradox), but *that* it is wrong is indubitable. It is not a sceptical problem but an absurdity." [Baker 85: 6] These are harsh words. Let us try to pinpoint the juncture that brings about such explosive disagreement in readers of Wittgenstein. And the juncture is located, hardly surprisingly, in §201: The passage that Kripke interprets as an admittance on Wittgenstein's part of a paradox having found its way into his work. As we remember, I glossed Kripke's understanding of the passage in question as follows: (a) Wittgenstein early in the PU introduces the concept of rule-following in order to break the hold of a certain conception of word-object correspondence (the "picture theory"), but it subsequently emerges that (b) the conception of rule-following runs into trouble on its own accord. Now, I think that Baker and Hacker could have gone along with Kripke this far. What they object to is his *diagnosis* of the trouble with the concept of rule-following.

Namely, what Baker and Hacker object to is Kripke's specific contention that the potential incoherence is due to a failure to incorporate the element of *community* into the account of rule-following. Baker and Hacker have an alternative assessment: What Wittgenstein finds necessary to make clear in and around §201 is that rules are not *interpreted* when we apply them. They are simply applied. In other words, it is the invocation of the notion of *interpretation* that is at fault, and which leads to paradoxical conclusions. The solution that Wittgenstein offers, Baker and Hacker maintain, is consequently to get rid of the notion that we *have* to interpret rules in order to know how to apply them. And then the paradox disappears – meaning, there was no paradox there in the first place. Hence there *is* no skeptical paradox in the PU that needs dealing with, on Baker and Hacker's reading, and no real motivation for Kripke's project.

To recapitulate: In the opinion of Baker and Hacker, Kripke interprets §201 in a misguided manner. Kripke took this paragraph to mean that operating in social isolation, a rule cannot really constrain our behavior because, unchecked by others, we can interpret it in an infinite variety of ways. Baker and Hacker, on the other hand, take this to merely suggest that rule-following is not a question of *interpretation* at all. On their reading, Wittgenstein is merely pointing out that it leads to an absurdity *if* we confuse rule-following with interpretation. Wittgenstein's formulation in §201 has therefore on Baker and Hacker's reading *hypothetical* rather than *categorical* force. "What has been rejected in §201" they summarize

is not the truism that rules guide action (or that our use of an expression conforms with its meaning, or that we are actually applying expressions in accord with their explanations, i.e. the rules for their use). Rather, what is repudiated is the suggestion that a rule determines an action as being in accord with it only in virtue of an interpretation.
[Baker 85: 20]

Wittgenstein's term "interpretation" thus pertains, on Baker & Hacker's view, to a reflective or *theoretical* understanding of something, rather than functioning as a synonym for *any* kind of comprehension. And this contention is supported by the second half of §201 (which we have suppressed so far in order to, for the sake of the argument, grant Kripke's view maximal latitude), a passage where Wittgenstein writes that:

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after the other; as if each one contented us for at least a moment, until we

thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule that is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases.

What Baker and Hacker are saying, is that Wittgenstein is claiming that rule-following is not a matter of *theoretical* (interpretative³⁹) understanding, but that it constitutes a kind of practical know-how. “Hence following a rule”, Baker and Hacker affirm, “is an activity, a *Praxis*.” [Baker 85: 20] Implying that Kripke’s purported skeptical “paradox” rests on a failure to grasp the difference between, to invoke Sellars’ distinction, knowing-that and knowing-how. Accordingly:

One’s understanding of a (rule-governed) expression is ultimately exhibited in its *application*, in *action*. For the mastery of the technique of using an expression in accord with a rule is a skill or a capacity ... The point of the notion that in learning to add I grasp a rule is not that the rule mysteriously determines a unique answer for indefinitely many *new* cases in the future (let alone that my intentions do). Rather we should say that the point is that it is of the nature of stipulating rules that future cases (typically) *are old cases*, that each application of a rule is doing the same again. [Baker 85: 88]

The talk of “new cases” alludes to Kripke’s concern regarding the question of what we do when we are confronted with what *he* regards as novel applications of a rule, the challenge of applying the rule in novel circumstances. This notion of new and novel cases is what Baker and Hacker reject. Thus to summarize, in their conception:

- (i) There *are* per definition no “new” cases in following a rule. All applications of a rule are basically the same.
- (ii) The practice of *following* rules is more fundamental than the reflective – call it second-order – *interpretation* of rules. Rather, (iib) the interpretation can be regarded as parasitical upon the application.

This brings us to a final point that should be considered in Baker and Hacker’s reading. Namely – call it (iic) – Baker and Hacker maintain that while rule-following is a *praxis*, it should not be too closely associated with *social* practice: “It is a misunderstanding to take ‘Praxis’ here to signify a social practice” they write. “The contrast here is not between an aria

³⁹ Cf. PU §198: “Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.”

[individual feat] and a chorus [collective feat], but looking at a score [reflection] and singing [action].” [Baker 85: 20] Therefore

...nothing in [Wittgenstein’s] discussion involves any commitment to a multiplicity of *agents*. All the emphasis is on the regularity, the multiple *occasions*, of action ... What is here crucial for Wittgenstein’s account of the concept of following a rule is recurrent action in appropriate contexts, action which *counts* as following a rule. Whether others are involved is a further question.

On the basis of this, Baker and Hacker conclude that: (a) “The term ‘practice’ is used by Wittgenstein in a similar sense to that in the phrase ‘in theory and in practice’” and (b) “The point is not to establish that language necessarily involves a community ... but that ‘words are deeds’.” [Baker 85: 20] In short, Baker and Hacker contend that learning a rule *means* to learn how to apply it, that is, to apply it in a justified manner. A conceptual wedge cannot be inserted between the rule and its employment. Therefore, in the Baker and Hacker universe, the fault of the skeptic (=Kripke) consists in seeking external justification for something that is, and can only be, justified internally to a rule. I.e. the “deeply rooted misconception of the sceptic” Baker & Hacker emphasize, “consists in searching for grounds supporting what is in effect an *internal relation*.” [Baker 85: 98, my italic.]

III. Inadequacies of both rule-internalism and rule-externalism

The pressure to go beyond the concept of rules

One may or may not accept Baker and Hacker’s rebuttal of Kripke’s *On Rules and Private Language*. Either way it is a hollow victory when looked at with Cavellian eyes. Because what obtrudes itself in the Cavellian perspective is how oddly *symmetrical* the accounts of Kripke and Baker & Hacker are. They both (a) pivot on the concept of rules, and both are (b) markedly *one-dimensional* in their portrayal of the PU. Both accounts seem bent on rectifying the paths of Wittgenstein’s meandering writings.⁴⁰ What is conspicuous in their approaches, is how each side picks *one* strain in Wittgenstein, and then endeavors to push this strain to its limit in the form of *one* particular concept. Thus Baker & Hacker winds up canonizing rule-internalism as the essence of the theme “grammar,” and Kripke winds up canonizing rule-externalism (checking) as the essence of the theme “community.” And

⁴⁰ For a comment on this, see [Kripke 82: 5].

together they canonize the notion of rules as the essence of the PU. So while one certainly can agree with each party that they have gotten hold of *something* of importance (a partial “truth”) regarding language and Wittgenstein’s treatment of it, one might well balk at their tendency to portray their respective focal notions as *the* privileged feature of language/the PU. Ironically, this one-sidedness goes against the grain of Wittgenstein’s self-presentation in the preface to the PU, where he noted that:

The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of ... long and involved journeyings.

The irony is that there is scant evidence that Kripke or Baker & Hacker have in the books under discussion embarked on that Wittgensteinian journey, or that they have afforded Wittgenstein’s manner of writing more than a cursory interest. On the whole, Richard Eldridge seems quite entitled to ask:

If Wittgenstein wished to assert what Baker and Hacker claim he did assert (that rules are transparent, normative, and, in a certain sense, arbitrary), then why does the text of *Philosophical Investigations* have that peculiar form? Why is there a recurring voice of temptation [towards skepticism]? [Eldridge 97: 212]

Upon perusing the pages – as we have just done in some detail – of both *On rules and private language* and *Scepticism, rules & language*, one is struck by the absence of anything paralleling (or representing) the PU’s therapeutic, not to say poetic, recalling of the rich and unruly variety of ordinary language. Both Kripke and Baker & Hacker might be said to be out of touch with what Cavell calls the *style* of the Investigations, and whatever systematic implications that style might have for the understanding of Wittgenstein’s project. In comparison with such Wittgensteinian qualifications as the one just quoted from the Preface, the one-sided appeal to rules and their validation, whether “internally” or “externally” conceived, takes on a somewhat reductive hue, and one might wonder if Kripke and Baker & Hacker are not committing the mistake, in an ironical reversal of everything Wittgenstein has warned against, of taking the notion of rules too far from its “ordinary” uses, in effect elevating it into an artificial “super-category.” In short, they seem to portray rules as the essence of language. And as Wittgenstein warned in the PU, we tend to be

...under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of

language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on. This order is a super-order between – so to speak – super-concepts. Whereas, of course, if the words ‘language’, ‘experience’, ‘world’, have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words ‘table’, ‘lamp’, ‘door’.
[§97]

Kripke and Baker & Hacker’s monotonous stress on the category of rules sits uneasily with the pluralism expressed by Wittgenstein in §65 of the PU: “Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, -but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘language’.” In their eagerness to make the PU conform to the economy of a single concept, both Kripke and Baker & Hacker seem oblivious to the injunctions built into the PU against treating the notions of rules, games, etc. as essences. Indeed, such a narrow interpretation *might* fit Wittgenstein’s early, rather formalistic, thoughts on rules and games from the thirties. The PU, on the other hand, could be read as criticizing, qualifying, and partly revoking those simplistic notions of rules and games. If we take *this* tack (which I presume that Cavell is doing), we could suggest that the “dogmatic” ideas on rule-following, belonging to the transitory phase away from the *Tractatus*, are retained in the PU as residual *temptations* one must come to terms with. I.e. we could suggest that the notion of rules – with its conflicting internalist and externalist temptations – are subjected to a dialectical struggle in the PU.

On something like this assumption Cavell argues in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ that Kripke’s misunderstanding of the PU is due to his failure to appreciate the subtleties of Wittgenstein’s text. On Cavell’s view Kripke fails to appreciate that the PU *anticipates* some of the crude interpretations of its ideas (interpretations which Wittgenstein himself might have entertained in say *Philosophical Grammar*), and *preempts* them by questioning (and negating) these interpretations within the text of the PU. Kripke’s reading of the PU – which indeed would have fitted *Philosophical Grammar* better – then issues out of a failure to recognize that the thought-figures he employs are already encoded and questioned in Wittgenstein’s more mature text. [Cavell 90: 68] We shall return to the extremely important subject of the PU’s self-representation below, when we examine the connection between ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ and Cavell’s essay ‘The *Investigations*’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself.’ For now, suffice it to say that in Cavell’s perspective, the skeptical Kripke as well as his dogmatic

adversaries such as Baker & Hacker, are overly impressed by the simile of rule-following, and thus ends up in the situation Wittgenstein explicitly warns against in §115: “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.” Taken too far, made into something “super,” the simile or picture of rule-following, like the picture of correspondence, becomes just another artificial construct that blocks our view of the “natural history” of language. Because, as Richard Eldridge points out:

Understanding an expression [is] not only akin to being able to generate the next term in a series, [but also] to understanding a musical theme, understanding a joke, and understanding a person. In these latter cases, it is not clear that a definite performance or definite range of definite performances counts as exhibiting understanding. There is nothing definite, but many indefinite things, that one can do to evince understanding. The situation is unlike that of a rule with fixed and definite accordant performances. [Eldridge 97: 211]

Eldridge appears to be justified in his assessment when we consider such a passage of the PU as §23. Here Wittgenstein is hardly proposing a *theory* of language (and definitely not one based on rules), he is merely reminding us of the various ways language works in various contexts, and, as part of our forms of life, furnishes us with a multiplicity of ways of inhabiting the world. Consequently, as Crary/Read writes:

Cavell claims that, for Wittgenstein, what leads us into philosophical confusion is our attraction to explanations of projections of words which seems to *insure* agreement in so far as they appear to go beyond or cut deeper than our ordinary practices with words. Wittgenstein’s ambition in philosophy, as Cavell evokes it here, is to facilitate the recognition that the demand for reflective understanding that drives us to philosophize will be met, not by explanations of our lives with language which seems to proceed from the outside, but rather by explanations grounded in the ordinary circumstances of those lives. [Crary 01: 8]

One could submit in favor of this view how, in order too make us *see* this, rather than just think it intellectually, Wittgenstein asks us in §23 to consider a slew of language-uses indicated by the following examples:

Giving orders, and obeying them–
Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its
measurements–
Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)–

Reporting an event—
Speculating about an event—
Forming or testing a hypothesis—
Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
Making up a story; and reading it—
Singing catches—
Guessing riddles—
Making riddles—
Making a joke; telling it—
Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—
Translating from one language into another—
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

Wittgenstein comments that it is “interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language.” [Wittgenstein 58: 12] In this remark we find no indication that the concept of rule-following does (or that Wittgenstein thinks it does) provide an apt description of *all* these language-uses. Are we not doing violence to our linguistic sensibilities when we talk about the “rules” of, say, making up a story or a riddle? Or to use Wittgenstein’s term: Is it really *perspicacious* to describe all the above uses of language as rule-following? Does not then the very notion of rule-following empty out into vacuity? For, as Wittgenstein prefaces his list by asking, “how many kinds of sentence are there?” He answers himself: “There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call ‘symbols’, ‘words’, ‘sentences’. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language ... come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten.”

Passages like these I take to be the main reason why Cavell does *not* maintain that a notion – let alone a theory of – rule-following constitutes the privileged linguistic paradigm within Wittgenstein’s mature philosophical project. Indeed, even Mulhall comes somewhat round to this view of Cavell’s work, in his concession to Affeldt that

I was of course aware of the ... texts of Cavell’s....articulating his hostility to the idea of grammar as a framework of rules, but I gave little detailed attention to either since neither seemed to me to provide any clear and detailed justification for this hostility. [Mulhall 98b: 33]

And further:

It became clear to me that Cavell was deeply suspicious from a very early stage of his work of any such talk of Wittgensteinian criteria as rules, or of grammatical investigations as uncovering a framework of rules; but it was not at all clear to me what the grounds of this suspicion were, and it was equally unclear to me that anything significant in Cavell's reading of criteria and grammar was threatened by reformulating it in the Baker & Hacker terminology and turns of phrase with which my writing has been inflected. [Mulhall 98b: 33]

Hopefully, we have by now managed to suggest some justification for Cavell's "hostility" and "suspicion" against the notion of a framework of rules, grounds which makes clearer why, as Cavell contends against Kripke (and it might as well be against Baker and Hacker), he "cannot share the sense that Wittgenstein attaches salvational importance to rules". [Cavell 90: 67] True, rule-following may be *a* paradigm of language-use, but not *the* privileged one; it may be one (class of) way(s) of using words, but not *the* way. Considering this pluralism, Cavell asks in *The Claim of Reason*

...why shouldn't one say that there is a required appropriateness with respect to each breed of thing (object or being), something appropriate for bread, something else for stones, something for large stones that block one's path and something for small smooth stones that can be slung or shied; something for grass, for flowers, for orchards, for forests, for each fish of the sea and each fowl of the air; something for each human contrivance and for each human condition; and if you like, on up? For each link in the Great Chain of Being there is an appropriate hook of response. [Cavell 99: 441-42]

In comparison with this poetic evocation of the variety and wealth of the world and its words, neither Kripke nor Baker & Hacker appears very felicitous in their assessment of "natural" language, nor in their characterization of the Wittgensteinian (pre-)text that inspired Cavell to rhapsodize thus. In comparison Kripke and Baker & Hacker tend towards arid, not to say rigid, portrayals of language and our community in it. In this perspective both what we have called rule-internalism and what we have called rule-externalism fails to do justice to the unruliness and the richness of words, as well as to that of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*.

IV. Completing the triangular reading of the PU

Representations of struggle and reconciliation

The above indicates that there ought to be a third way of reading the PU apart from those chosen by Kripke and Baker & Hacker. A way not so much between them as *beyond* them. My hermeneutical hypothesis is that Cavell is trying to mark out a third way in a dialectical fashion. With this in mind, let us review the following points about Cavell's reasoning in 'The Argument of the Ordinary':

(a) Cavell emphasizes that "My impression is that Wittgenstein takes the ideas Kripke is explicating and organizing to be more various and entangled and specific than Kripke sees to me to give Wittgenstein credit for ... I take Wittgenstein to say fairly explicitly that rules cannot play the fundamental role Kripke takes him to cast them in." [Cavell 90: 67] This seems, on the face of it, to target specifically Kripke's account of rule-following. However, if we read on, we find that Cavell's argument in support of the contention just quoted *does* in fact work indiscriminately against Kripke and Backer & Hacker, striking at *any* privileging of the notion of rules in the reading of the PU.

(b) Namely, Cavell goes on to contend that:

In the sentence succeeding the one ... in which Wittgenstein names 'our paradox', Wittgenstein writes: 'The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.' [1] This seems to me equally readable as suggesting not that this paradox is 'central' but that it is no sooner named than its significance is undermined. Wittgenstein's tone is: What our so-called paradox came to was no more than this so-called answer can completely tame. [2] The facts about possible interpretations of a rule are not sufficient to cause skepticism (though they may play into a skeptical hand, one that has already portrayed rules and their role in language in a particular way) [3] My claim is based, for example, on taking Wittgenstein's remark at §199, 'This is of course a note on the grammar of the expression "to obey a rule"' ... to apply to his entire discussion of rules, for example, to questions of what counts as obedience, following, interpretation, regularity... *no one of which is less or more fundamental than the concept of a rule* [Cavell 90: 67-8, my italic]

I have divided the passage into three sections [1-3] in order to clarify the following issue: Cavell's argument in the just quoted passage only to a certain extent matches Baker and Hacker's way of rejecting Kripke's inference from §201 to the reality of the skeptical paradox. *They* took the words "so there would be neither accord nor conflict here" to mean that Wittgenstein was merely dismissing the notion that following a rule amounted to *interpreting* it. In other words, Baker & Hacker took the scope of this point to be restricted to the question of the centrality of *interpretation* within Wittgenstein's wider notion of rule-following, which Baker & Hacker *do* take to be "the" central notion of the PU.

(c) Cavell, on the other hand, goes much further in [2] and [3], where he suggests that what Wittgenstein *is* in fact dismissing is not merely a certain notion of the *interpretation* of rules; Cavell is taking Wittgenstein to be speaking against the privileging of *rule-following* as such. The notion of rule-following being, in Cavell's reading of the PU, ultimately neither more nor less fundamental than "questions of what counts as obedience, following, interpretation, regularity". This indicates rather strongly that Cavell is rejecting *any* privileging of the notion of rules – not exclusively Kripke's.

(d) Consequently Cavell is arguing in this passage that rule-following is only *one* example of how we use words, an example that, unfortunately, Kripke as well as Baker and Hacker have fastened on as *the* paradigmatic example of life-in-language. Consequently not only Kripke's, but also Baker and Hacker's privileging of the notion of rule-following "play into a skeptical hand." I.e., on my view, the passage goes to show that though unstated, the reach of Cavell's essay extends beyond Kripke to include the mainline of "orthodox" Wittgensteinianism from Malcolm/Albritton to Baker/Hacker.

If we accept this interpretation (in keeping with the dialectical dynamic drawn up in Fig. 1), there are *two* "axis" of motion in Cavell's 'Argument of the Ordinary.' Meaning that there is in 'The Argument of the Ordinary' implicitly operant

1. The "axis" or struggle of skepticism vs. dogmatism, represented in my account by the complementary positions of Kripke (rule-externalism) and Baker & Hacker (rule-externalism).
2. The axis between "struggle" (as such) and the space "beyond" struggle (peace, reconciliation.)

In other words, I am reading two axial movements out of the dynamic described by Cavell as “the argument of the ordinary” (and which he finds recorded in the PU), namely the movement between *skepticism* and *dogmatism* on the one hand, and between *struggle* and *peace* on the other. And as we indicated in Fig. 1, the first axis (the X-Y axis) can be thought of in terms of two symmetrically opposing ways of *theorizing* language, while the second axis (the X/Y-Z axis in Fig. 1, i.e. the one between ‘*’ and ‘**’) can be thought of in terms of the opposition between a *theory* of language, and the renouncing of theoretical concerns in the acknowledgement of our everyday *dependence* on language.

This last opposition could also be (loosely) formulated in terms of the Tractarian distinction between “saying” what (the structure of) language is, and merely “showing” language in operation, thus aligning our account with the element of “quietism” that carries over from the early to the late Wittgenstein. The aim, on this view, of Wittgenstein’s overall project is to bring about an *awareness* of the power of language, not a proof of it.⁴¹ In terms of the strategy of quietism (of showing rather than saying), one could say that Kripke and Baker & Hacker commit complementary fallacies: B&H commit the fallacy of stating that we actually *know* language to have an internally self-validating structure (indeed that *this* is what the PU proves), while Kripke commits the mistake of stating – in a fallacious reversal of the first fallacy – that language has *no* self-supporting ability, and must instead be supported by “outer” safeguards (which *he* thinks is what the PU proves.) Dialectically, they saw back and forth in an endless struggle, obscuring what ought to have been clear in the first place. Kripke and Baker & Hacker are so obsessed with the *rules* of language (which purportedly tell us *why* language works) that they fail to see the actual working language that is right in front of them. Indeed, as Wittgenstein writes in *Culture and Value*:

People who are constantly asking 'why' are like tourists who stand in front of a building reading Baedeker and are so busy reading the history of its construction, etc., that they are prevented from seeing the building. [Wittgenstein 80: 40]

⁴¹ With this in mind we might well remember the words from the *Tractatus* 6.54:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

That is, Kripke and Baker & Hacker act as if they are *blind* to the aspects of language which are not reconstructible in terms of the notion of rules. In contrast, the course of action I see Cavell as recommending (in the name of Wittgenstein), is to “say” as little as possible about the general structure of language. In other words, the recommended course of action is to allow language to be, from the point of view of philosophical *theory*, to a certain extent indeterminate. Which means that one judiciously refrains from trying to construct a “metaphysical” *explanation* of language. Indeed, as Eldridge writes in *Leading a human life*:

What might be *persuasive*, though not amounting to a proof [of the validity of language], is [to offer] a different, richer *description* of what is involved in understanding, in using language ... Such a description would have to focus *not* on the transparency of rule-following behavior, *not* on the natural emergence of rule-following out of biologically given dispositions, and *not* on the transparency to themselves of certain autonomous, inner, intellectual acts of judgment, but instead on how wishes, anxieties, and efforts at expressiveness and self-coherence (to and for oneself and others) attach to ordinary conceptual performances ... [S]uch a description would have to take the form not of a *theory* of how some object independent of the description ... controls conceptual performances, but instead of an acknowledgement. It would have to acknowledge itself as a conceptual performance that enacts and expresses these very wishes, anxieties and efforts at expressiveness and self-coherence. [Eldridge 97: 265]

If we assent to something like this notion, it does not necessarily mean that we are claiming that language is void of order (that would be skepticism); we are merely suggesting that the order of ordinary language *transcends* our categories of structural determination. This does of course not preclude making rules for or formal models of language for specific purposes (say for the purposes of linguistic systematization); the objection is only towards the wholesale *identification* of language with such rules and models, which are what one could call reifications of the *power* of language. The correlate to this quietist attitude is to be content with *demonstrating* how language works in substantial discourse, acknowledging our dependence on that “substantiality” for the meaning of our lives. However, there is always the potential *temptation* towards ultimate, and reifying, *explanations* of language, which leaves behind the substance of our lives in favor of a formal, hollow shell. Such temptations belong to the existential drama of our lives, and, on Cavell’s reading, this drama is exactly what the PU *enacts*.

In sum, the two dynamics of the PU, between skepticism and dogmatism, and between struggle and peace, dramatizes a criss-crossing movement of thought, one that spans searches for ultimate linguistic-epistemic knowledge/reassurance as well as peaceful acknowledgements of language. Crucially – *most* crucially – I take the latter axis of tension, the one between struggle and peace, to be indicative:

- (i) Of what Cavell refers to when he talks about himself/Wittgenstein seeking to *overcome* the argument of the ordinary, it being “an argument I seek a way out of, as I suppose the *Investigations* does in seeking to renounce philosophical theses”.
- (ii) Of what Cavell alludes to as the “space not party to the struggle of the sides,” which I take to be a *utopian* notion expressed in the words:

[The sceptical and ordinary] voices, or sides, in the argument of the ordinary, do not exhaust the space of the *Investigations*, or the task of its prose. There is the space not party to the struggle of the sides (I do not think of it as a further voice) often containing its most rhetorical or literary passages – as, for example, about the icy region of the sublime, or the keyboard of the imagination, or turning our investigation around as a around a still point, or repairing a spider’s web – that are gestures of assessment as from beyond this struggle. [Cavell 90: 83]

The important point is that on Cavell’s view none of the stations indicated by X/Y/Z (in Fig. 1) are imagined as permanent. They all give voice to recurrent stages of life, or if you want, dramatizes various phases in the life-cycle of our linguistic life-forms, cycles of doubt, dogmatic assurance, renewed doubts, peaceful renouncing of certainty, etc. Being human/finite intelligences we all have, on this vision, to various extents and with varying frequencies “skeptical”, “dogmatic” and “peaceful” interludes in our lives-in-language. Each of us traces out a characteristic life-pattern, some more dogmatic, some more skeptical, some more peaceful, as we zig-zag or criss-cross in various directions between the existential postures indicated by X, Y and Z. The enactment of this life-pattern – or one such, an exemplary one – I take to be what Cavell points to when he calls the PU a “portrait of the human,” a portrait where “each of the voices, and silences, of the *Investigations* are the philosopher’s, call him Wittgenstein, and they are meant as ours ... ones I may at any time find myself in”. [Cavell 90: 83]

V. Moments of clarity:

The aesthetic self-representation of the *Investigations*

Thus, as Cavell argues in ‘The *Investigations*’ aesthetic self-representation’, finding the words to enact the ideal of agreement in judgment which governs our life in ordinary language can be linked to the enactment of the experience of a moment of *clarity*, and to the sense that such moments of clarity, while not constituting it, at least *figures* reconciliation with the world and our peers. Reflecting along these lines in ‘The *Investigations*’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself,’ Cavell writes that

We seem to have arrived at the question whether the concept of perspicuousness invited by the experience of certain formal proofs is further invited by a certain unity or reordering of ordinary words – supposing this to be something Wittgenstein means by his discovery of (non-formal) moments of complete clarity; ordinary words, that is, which are not meant to line up as premises to a conclusion. [Gibson 04: 28]

Cavell’s notion of a peaceful “space” in the PU can then be pinned to a literary representation of a “pleasure of some kind, and a kind of liberation or relief, and, we might now specify, a sense of arrival, or completeness” [Gibson 04: 28] Thus the only thing we need in order to round out our line of thought, is to see how Cavell finds that the “space” beyond the struggles of the skeptical and dogmatic voices is formally “represented” within the text of the PU – represented in a *stylistic* manner. And the answer to this is readily forthcoming. Because what Cavell finds to be the emblematic representation of the satisfactions of ordinary words, is *the literary form of aphorism* as employed by Wittgenstein in the PU. Writes Cavell:

So here’s the surprising premise in my argument for taking Wittgenstein’s writing as essential to his philosophizing, the manner to the method: The concept of the perspicuous, governed by the criteria of completeness, pleasure, and breaking off, is as surely invited by contexts of aphorism as it is by those of proof and of grammatical investigation. [Gibson 04: 29]

And, when we think of it in these terms, we see that Cavell gives the same answer in a passage from ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’. Namely the one where he writes that:

[The sceptical and ordinary] voices, or sides, in the argument of the ordinary, do not exhaust the space of the *Investigations*, or the task of

its prose. There is the space not party to the struggle of the sides (I do not think of it as a further voice) often containing its most rhetorical or literary passages – as, for example, about the icy region of the sublime, or the keyboard of the imagination, or turning our investigation around as a around a still point, or repairing a spider’s web – that are gestures of assessment as from beyond this struggle. [Cavell 90: 83]

This notion of a “space not party to the struggle of the sides” becomes readable as a placeholder for the “utopia” of peace and reconciliation, which literally means No-place. In other words, what our present discussion has added to the dialectical reading of ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’, is the notion that some of the PU’s “rhetorical or literary passages”, which we now have identified as “utopian” punctuations of the conversation between skepticism and dogmatism, have the form of aphorisms, literary intermezzos which in their very mode of composition invite concepts such as “completeness, pleasure, and breaking off”, i.e. concepts that are “as surely invited by contexts of aphorism as it is by those of proof and of grammatical investigation.” Thus if we combine the dramatical form of opposing *voices* (representing struggle, antagonism, partialness) with the poetical form of *aphorisms* (representing peace, reconciliation, wholeness) one discerns within the PU a representation of the argument of the ordinary, an argument that coincide with our existential life-cycle of anxiety, dogmatic assurance, questioning of dogmas, peaceful reconciliation with our limited powers, relapse into anxious doubt, etc. This way of understanding Cavell’s reading of the PU in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ is corroborated by the closing words of the essay:

A moral I derive from the Investigations ... is accordingly: I am not to give myself explanations that divide me from myself, that takes sides against myself, that would exact my consent, not attract it. That would cede my voice to isolation. Then I might never be found. [Cavell 90: 100]

The way I understand this statement, it indicates that both dogmatism and skepticism are partial truths or positions that “divide” me against my *whole* self; the moral being that I must cease trying to explain *why* language works, and instead acknowledge ordinary language as a *condition* of my worldly, social being. Failing to do this, I risk “isolation,” to lose my voice, never to be “found” by myself and my peers. That is: I will not be able to form a community – a “city of words” – with my fellow humans, something which will ultimately impair my own *selfhood*. Accordingly the experiences of “illumination” that Cavell associates with such practices as aphorism, geometrical proof, “perspicuous presentation” and the like, become emblematic of our relief and gratitude when our worldly lives together “makes sense.” All

this, I take Cavell to be saying, is represented within the PU in its use of (a) drama and (b) poetic aphorism, a rhetorical form or combination of forms that seeks to “hit off” the anxieties and satisfactions of our ordinary use of words, along with the dangers of falling into either skepticism or dogmatism as one tries to come to terms with one’s finite condition. In other words, the fully fleshed out Cavellian-Wittgensteinian “argument of the ordinary” portrays our human existence as finite intelligences that have to rely on our powers of judgment, such as they are. In view of this, the positions assumed by Kripke and Baker & Hacker become only “partial”, parties to one *side* of the argument, the one that underplays the importance of the utopian (and correspondingly elusive) ideal of spontaneous *agreement in judgment*.

This gives us an idea of the relation between Cavell’s philosophical modernism and his “politics of interpretation” in regard to the philosophical tradition. Namely, Cavell’s dramatic interpretation of the PU has as its purpose to make sense of the Wittgensteinian contention that one is not presenting a *theory* of language. Meaning: “theory” is not the “genre” of the PU – “drama” is. Hence the “genre” of the PU, on Cavell’s reading, is reminiscent of Plato’s *dialogues*; dialogues that constituted, if you will, a specifically philosophical variety of the form of drama, one that cannot out of hand be equated with our contemporary form of a scientific “theory.” (It might still be *theoria* in the ancient sense of *contemplation*.) If we extend this line of thought, one could say that Cavell in his philosophical *essayism* is reappropriating or taking back that Platonic philosophical-dramatic *form*. Thus the reader of Cavell, as the reader of Wittgenstein, or for that matter of Plato, should be mindful of what the text shows *as a whole*, in the sense that it constitutes an integral *composition* – a composition in counterpoint, one might say – of the voices of each of the interlocutors appearing in it, a specific, sense-carrying pattern of juxtaposition. Thus in ‘The *Investigations*’ Everyday Aesthetics of itself’ Cavell notes that

Part of my sense of the *Investigations* as a modernist work is that its portrait of the human is recognizable as one of the modern self, or, as we are given to say, the modern subject. Since we are considering a work of philosophy, this portrait will not be unrelated to a classical portrait of the subject of philosophy, say that to be found in Plato’s *Republic*, where a human soul finds itself chained in illusion, so estranged from itself and lost to reality that it attacks the one who comes to turn it around and free it by a way of speaking to it, thus inciting it to seek the pleasures of the clear light of day. [Gibson 04: 25]

This indicates the “perfectionist” orientation of Cavell’s politics of interpretation, and by extension, of his philosophical modernism, contrasting with that of more “orthodox” modes of ordinary language philosophy. Its aim is, in some modern and secular way, to ignite an *awakening* in the “soul” of the reader.

To be sure, this dialogical-perfectionist approach brings interesting new philosophical perspectives, yet it is also, as we shall find, the source of the central problem of Cavell’s work, because it becomes *too* committed to the utopian “openness” of dialogue, or to the “unattained” self. That is, guided by nothing but the utopian ideal of reconciliation, Cavell encounters complications trying to come to terms with the concrete *applications* of that ideal, what in remembrance of Plato’s *Republic* could be called the soul, or self’s, return to the world of the *polis*. This dilemma will become increasingly prominent as we press for a clarification of Cavell’s own views on language and intelligibility.

Chapter 5

Attunement, agreement and the problem of the self: From ordinary language philosophy to moral perfectionism

Can I, must I, leave it to, say, literature, or history, or anthropology, to articulate and preserve the richness of my experience for me? Are their authorities in positions to word their impressions that are essentially different from my capacities as a participant of a human culture? To cede the understanding of my experience, trivial and crucial, to them would require, from my point of view, a massive effort of discounting.¹

Hopefully it has become clearer why Cavell follows neither Kripke, nor Baker and Hacker in privileging the notion of rules in understanding Wittgenstein's mature thought, or more generally, in the understanding of language. The same, we have seen, goes for related notions such as "frameworks" and "conceptual schemes." Yet this puts us (and Cavell) in a delicate position. Namely, by choosing to follow Cavell in that approach, we have divested ourselves of the structural notions of language that are best suited to a (supposedly) systematic, constructive exposition of it. This predicament, I suspect, is responsible for the fact that Cavell is far more eager to emphasize what language is *not*, than in elaborating what it *is*. Indeed, Cavell is far more explicit when it comes to describing the *crisis* of language, than when it comes to describing the resolution of that crisis. Thus Cavell's eloquence is considerably greater when he is merely evoking utopian reconciliation in "spontaneous" agreement in judgment (as he argues Wittgenstein does in the aphoristic "poetry" of the PU), than when he is pressed to specify how we *actually* arrive at agreement.

¹ [Cavell 05: 3]

As I have suggested, this adds up to a bias in Cavell's work in favor of merely *enacting*, dramatically, the crisis of language as well as *figuring* (poetically) its overcoming. This, as we saw, colors Cavell's reading of the PU as well, which is far more concerned with interpreting it as a drama than it is with eliciting arguments from it, however limited in scope those arguments might be. The upshot is that while Cavell is reasonably systematic in criticizing other people's views of language and dialectically pitting them against each other, and in evoking how this lack of explanations (lack of epistemic "grounding") can cast us into a skeptical crisis regarding the powers of language, he is considerably less generous with the specifics regarding *his* views about the powers of language. Indeed, Cavell almost seems to be *determined* to keep "outstanding" the question of "the sources or domain of that power." [Cavell 94: 102] Of course, to a certain extent this is what one might expect, considering the "nature of the investigation." Still, I do not think one should give up on sustained discussions *too* quickly. Hence, while I *do* think there is a time for quietism (to pass over in silence that which we cannot speak about) I do not think that time has come just yet.

In the following I will therefore attempt to interpolate, on the basis of points that I gather from Cavell's texts, and in conjunction with my own understanding of Wittgenstein (and with some elements from Heidegger), the outline of a more direct account of ordinary language-use. To wit, this is an account that mainly focuses on how we *learn* language. Hence in this context, to understand what language is, just *means* to understand how we learn it. This is maybe not so terribly exciting in itself (nor is it meant to be, since the process involved is entirely "ordinary"); yet it leads to some quite interesting issues concerning immanence and worldhood. Yet whether this would ultimately be *Cavell's* account I will discuss in the second part of the chapter. Indeed, it will lead me to a diagnosis of the essential radicalism of Cavell's "politics of interpretation", lending it the *transgressive* tendency which links it to the problematic of the self that is foregrounded in what Cavell calls "Emersonian" moral perfectionism.

I. Attunement and agreement

Judgment within forms of life

The way I understand Cavell, his view of language is primarily concerned with what he characterizes as “the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life.’” Namely, on Cavell’s vision of life in language, we, as he famously puts it

...learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. [Cavell 94: 52]

This, in my view, implies that Cavell is not really interested in language as a *structure* (which is the traditional approach of “linguistic” philosophy), but as a part of our lives, a characteristic of the human condition.² Hence language is regarded by Cavell more as a human *capacity* than as a “framework” or “conceptual scheme”. This seems to lead to what I would call a *distributed* model of normativity in language, which privileges Wittgenstein’s notion of “agreement in judgment” rather than the notion of rules. Namely, I will understand linguistic normativity to reside in a form of life as a whole – in a way of apprehending and inhabiting the world, indeed in a way of *seeing* it. This means that the normativity of language (prompting us to judge some formulations to be more “right” than others) resides not in a number of identifiable “norms” or “rules,” but in incarnated, worldly, communal thought and action as such. That Wittgenstein held something like this view is indicated in the following passage from the PU:

² What *Being and Time* would call an “existential”, a dimension of being-in-the-world.

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” – It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. [PU §242]

Thus the way we use words is simply part of how we orient ourselves in the world, going about our various forms of life. This orientation in the world, I contend, is what is expressed by Cavell’s term “attunement.” To get a sense of what he means by that, and how it relates to Wittgensteinian agreement in judgment, consider a quote from the *Claim of Reason*:

The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures. That a group of human beings [agree in language] says, so to speak, that they are mutually voiced with respect to it, mutually attuned from top to bottom. [Cavell 99: 32]

That is, the tendency of our judgment to “agree” with that of others, as well as with the goings in the world, is attributed by Cavell to what he calls attunement. To say that we are capable of orienting ourselves in the world *is* therefore to say that we are attuned to the world; and to say that we judge in a manner compatible with the judgment of others means that we are attuned to *them*. Hence, when Cavell talks above of

...sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation...

he is talking about various ways in which we are attuned to the world and each other. Which is another way of talking about ways in which we use *words* in a manner that is largely comprehensible to each other. And that holds even in cases where that use may be novel or idiosyncratic, hence cannot be validated according to a pre-established rule. For instance, to take a Cavellian example, if someone invents the expression to “feed the ego”, he or she is not necessarily met by incomprehension; people may “catch on” to this way of speaking, even without an explicit stipulation of meaning. That is, as Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*:

We learn the use of ‘feed the kitty’, ‘feed the lion’, ‘feed the swan’, and one day one of us says, ‘feed the machine’, or ‘feed his pride’, or ‘feed wire’, and we understand, we are not troubled. Of course we could, in most of these cases, use a different word, not attempt to

project, or transfer, 'feed' from contexts like 'feed the monkey' into contexts like 'feed the machine'. But what should be gained if we did. And what should be lost? [Cavell 99: 181]

This suggests that to Cavell, to be attuned to each other *means* to share a form of life, including a language, which means to be members of some kind of *community*: a community of mutual intelligibility.

The standing possibility of skepticism

Now, the crucial point regarding skepticism is that this attunement *is* in a sense "groundless". We are not, to borrow McDowell's terms, able to view our agreement "sideways on", nor are we, as we saw in the previous chapter, able to secure it with rules. Implying, as Cavell says, that since human "speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this" (= attunement), our whole *existence* is in a sense groundless. Our entire "world" hangs on "nothing". This is to say that the way Cavell is setting up the situation, a skeptical crisis is *always* possible; indeed, it is incipient every time we for some reason stop to consider the ultimate groundlessness of our "sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance". Crisis becomes all the more imminent when we find our interactions with the world and others puzzling or *disappointing*. On Cavell's analysis, if the puzzlement or disappointment is profound enough, it may mushroom from a concern over a local dilemma (how can I know that X really was in pain when he said "ouch!" the other day, maybe he was faking), to a *global* concern whether I can ever know *anything* about *anybody*. This is the point where a philosophical problem, as Wittgenstein puts it, takes the form "I do not know my way about." But this is just a way of describing a situation where a *loss of orientation* – which means a deficiency of Cavellian "attunement" – becomes so acute that it turns from an "ordinary" problem into a "philosophical" one. Consequently, on this account the source of skeptical worries is an experience of *disharmony* with the world and others (and indeed with oneself); in short, an experience of alienation.³

The picture we then arrive at is that there is a slippery slope going from "everyday" puzzlement and disappointment to full blown skepticism. For instance, to take another typical Cavellian example, if a person behaves strangely enough, we might one day start to wonder if that person

³ Cf. the Freudo-Marxist connections we discussed in the previous chapter, and their background in Hegel's analysis of the "unhappy consciousness".

is really a human being, or if he or she may be a robot or an alien; from this we may proceed further down the slope to the question of how we can know that not *everybody* else are robots or aliens. (Or in a twist, that we are not one ourselves.) For a plethora of such “uncanny” scenarios, we need only turn to *The Claim of Reason*, Part IV. Or, for further illustration, compare Cavell’s account of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story ‘The Sandman’ in ‘The Fantastic of Philosophy’:

Hoffmann’s story features the beautiful automaton Olympia whom its hero falls in love with (precipitated by his viewing her through a magic spyglass constructed by one of her constructors). At first this love serves for the amusement of others who are certain they see right through the inanimateness of the machine; but then the memory of the love serves to feed their anxiety that they may be making the same error with their own beloveds. [Cavell 94b: 186]

In this fantastic tale the main protagonist, Nathaniel, eventually breaks down as he sees the “automaton pulled apart by its two fathers, or makers.” Cavell’s overarching point in relation to such stories and scenarios is that there are no *logical* (or more generally, a priori) principles that can prevent or halt our journey down the slippery slope of radical doubt. To the contrary, logic (or a priori modes of thought) is typically what eases us along on that path. Skeptical madness can be logical, all too logical. Cavell’s alternative suggestion is therefore that if anything, what returns us to the confidence of our “ordinary” attunement, is a deepening of that attunement itself; that is, immersion in substantial forms of life and their concomitant forms of expression. Tellingly, this is what happens in the Hoffmann-story; it is love, not logic that restores the hero to the sanity of everyday life. *Intimacy* rather than rigorous proofs saves him from the tragedy of skeptical madness. Luckily for him (that is, by a species of *grace*), Nathaniel is

...before the final catastrophe, nursed back to health by his childhood sweetheart Clara, whom he had forgotten in favor of Olympia. [Cavell 94b: 186]

Yet, when looked at from the perspective of Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy, this “return” to the familiarity of the ordinary is complicated by the fact that nobody really knows exactly what *is* ordinary. Because the ordinary, to Cavell, is something which *develops*. Hence its boundaries must be fluid. This is a consequence, perhaps unintended, of Austin’s contention that:

...our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetime of many generations [Austin 61: 182]

There is no reason to suppose that this process has ended just now; if the ordinary changes, ordinary language changes too. In consequence the “ordinary” is not a ready-made thing we can appeal to as a template; it is in the making as we speak. Hence, to preempt a merely *dogmatic* affirmation of the way words are used, we must retain a certain openness regarding what we allow ourselves and others to say. That is, we must allow ourselves and others what Cavell calls the “arrogation of voice”, including new “projections” of words. Considering the potentially controversial nature of such new projections, this means that in order to forestall dogmatism, *one must retain an openness regarding “what one says when” that entails the possibility of disappointment and disagreement.* Which again means that in order to forestall dogmatism, one must keep ajar the door that could in principle lead to the slippery slope of skeptical doubt.

In sum: To retain openness, we must also retain the possibility of *crisis*. That is why, on Cavell’s vision, the skeptical and dogmatic solutions to the “groundlessness” of human existence keeps opposing each other in a perpetual drama (sawing back and forth), and why it is so easy to find oneself caught up in the struggle, contributing to one of the sides. Consequently, there is to Cavell no hope of strictly eliminating the *possibility* of skepticism, neither in logic nor in rule-following nor in the statistical sampling of empirical language-use. Such attempts could indeed be regarded as indicative of “bad faith”, “false consciousness”, “flight from freedom”, etc., in the sense of our discussion in the previous chapters. It would entail a “reification” of our lives in language, avoiding our responsibilities as individual members of the human community of intelligibility. Thus we cannot exempt ourselves from the *possibility* of skepticism without excising our human, individual “voice” from the “portrait of the human”.

This I understand to be Cavell’s basic analysis of our life in language, as indicated in for instance *The Claim of Reason* and *Conditions Handsome & Unhandsome*. And so far, I find it plausible enough. But then what? At this point there are two courses of further reflection open to us. (1) We can dwell on the crisis of language, elaborating the dialectical pattern of skeptical and dogmatic responses to it, only punctuated by poetic aphorisms figuring utopian reconciliation in an unspecified point “beyond” the struggle. This, indeed, is the course of

action that Cavell seems to be most drawn to. That is, while he professes to not be a skeptic himself, there is little doubt that he is endlessly fascinated by it, and that he never tires of enacting it as a philosophical drama. On the other hand, (2) we could pursue the option, correspondingly underplayed by Cavell, of being more specific about what it is with our “ordinary” ways of perceiving and thinking and acting and talking that do afford us *some* kind of satisfaction regarding the “realness” of our world and our peers. I of course have already committed myself to the pursuit of the latter alternative; later we will discuss why Cavell tends to shy away from it.

Imagination, attunement and aspect-perception

In the following I will try to elaborate Cavell’s notion of “attunement” in terms of what Wittgenstein says about *imagination*, or equivalently, about perceiving aspects or “seeing as.” Specifically, I am here thinking about the notion of imagination Wittgenstein suggests in *Remarks on the foundations of mathematics* when he writes that

...imagining is not a particular mental process during which one usually shuts one’s eyes or covers them with one’s hands.
[Wittgenstein 64: III-1]

Rather, by imagination or “imagining” (“vorstellen” is the word in the German original), I take it that Wittgenstein understands the ability to see (or otherwise apprehend) something “as” something, i.e. to apprehend something under a certain “aspect.” This is compatible with the way Cavell uses the word in *The Claim of Reason*, stressing that imagination does not necessarily mean “forming images” [Cavell 99: 353]. Rather imagination, Cavell goes on to say, “is the capacity for making connections, seeing or realizing possibilities”. If we combine this with the notions of attunement and agreement in judgment discussed above, we could say that we are attuned to the world and others in terms of how we “see” the environment. If we, on the whole, apprehend the same possibilities, make the same connections, then we agree in judgment, that is, we are “in tune” with each other. In that case, we could say that on the whole our ways of looking at the world and talking about it *harmonize*. We are so to speak “tuned in” to the same possibilities of speech and action.

Imagination in this sense allows us not only to apprehend, at any given time, our *present* situation as an articulated “whole”, but to transcend the here-and-now, and thus to utilize

general terms in language, with potentially unlimitedly complex nuances, inflections and variations. This, at least, is how I understand Cavell's contention, quoted early in this chapter, that we

...learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts...

Hence, if I once or twice or thrice have been shown a duck, and learned to call *it* "duck", I am, or should be, able to "project" this term into future situations where I encounter similar creatures. Meaning that given proper instruction I should at a point realize that "duck" is not typically a proper name, but the name of a "family" in the Wittgensteinian sense. In other words, imagination is implicated in our power of apprehending likenesses and differences, picking out individual physiognomies and relations between them. Thus the power of imagination affords us the ability to apprehend a "gestalt" and follow it through a chain of resemblances without losing the sense of *relatedness* or what Wittgenstein calls "family resemblance". This means that imagination should enable us to both (1) apprehend a certain physiognomy as *identical* with one that we have encountered earlier, and (2) as a related instance of a *type* of physiognomy that we have encountered earlier.

In *nuce*, imagination, in the sense I am ascribing the notion to Wittgenstein and Cavell, constitutes a power of *articulate apprehension*, the power of apprehending an articulated world, which also means a world that can be spoken about. That is, a world which judgment can be pronounced upon, stating that things are "thus and so". Which is to say that I think that Wittgenstein, and by extension Cavell, are implicitly committed to the idea that thought, language and perception are somehow constituted together, i.e. that they are "equiprimordial" to use Heidegger's expression. Imagination is thus, as Wittgenstein says of aspect-perception, "Half visual experience, half thought." [Wittgenstein 58: 197] To invoke his famous example: We see the rabbit-shape *as* a rabbit-shape. In the words of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the philosophy of psychology*: "I point to a particular spot in [a] picture and say 'That is the eye of the rabbit or of the duck.'" [Wittgenstein 90: §84] Hence, contra what is often called the "myth of the given", we are, according to Wittgenstein, not confronted in perception with form + formless "content", but with always already constituted physiognomies, interrelated "gestalts" admitting of fine shades of significance. Indeed, this fine-tuned ability to apprehend aspects is, according to Wittgenstein, absolutely vital to the more advanced human capabilities, such as intersubjectivity. As he notes in his remarks on psychology:

Look into someone else's face and see the consciousness in it, and also a particular *shade* of consciousness. You see on it, in it, joy, indifference, interest, excitement, dullness etc. [Wittgenstein 90: §927]

This connection between aspect perception, imagination, attunement and intersubjectivity is emphasized also by Cavell:

Imagination is called for faced with the other, when I have to take the facts in, realize the significance of what is going on ... see his blink as a wince, and connect the wince with something in the world that there is to be winced at [Cavell 99: 354]

In sum, I take it that what Cavell means by imagination is something quite close to what Wittgenstein is thinking of when he speaks about aspect-perception, and that cognition, perception and language must be reflected upon *together*, as dimensions of one and the same attunement to the world and each other.⁴ It is in that juncture that the world appears to us *as* a world. Or better, using Heidegger's terminology from *Being and Time*, it is in the locus of cognition, perception and language that we appear to *ourselves* as always already "being-in-the-world", absorbed by our worldly "concerns".⁵ These Heideggerian "concerns" are embedded in what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life", which on my interpretation of Cavell's understanding of language is the ultimate (yet groundless) repository of our linguistic normativity. Consequently this linguistic normativity *is* not merely "linguistic", because it is caught up with our "imagination", which again is incarnated in worldly practice. Let us therefore turn to see how *precarious* that normativity can be, having no absolute ground or "first term" to appeal to, that is, no non-circular way of authorizing itself.

Attunement lost and found: Instruction, aspect-change and criteria

In the account we are evolving imagination or equivalently perceiving aspects, is a dimension of exercising judgment, which also comprises making pronouncements, statements to the effect

⁴ Cf. Mulhall's *On Being in the World*. [Mulhall 93]

⁵ In Heidegger's own words in *Being and Time*:

"Dasein's facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed [zerstreut] or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in. The multiplicity of these is indicated by the following examples: having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining.... All these ways of Being-in have concern ('Bersorgen') as their kind of Being." [Heidegger 02: 83]

that things are “thus and so”. So far we have assumed that these pronouncements agree “on the whole”, i.e. we have been describing agreement in judgment as a background-condition. What happens if pronouncements persist in *contradicting* each other, leading to serious quarrel and confusion? Now, since perceiving aspects is regarded by us as a form of attunement not only to the world but also *to others*, we could say that if one person is stating, say, that the rabbit has pointed ears, while the other keeps insisting that it is the *duck* that has a pointed *beak*, they are not, with Cavell’s expression, very well “attuned”. I.e., in their failure to exhibit “agreement in judgment” they do not *harmonize* with each other. The question therefore is: If this disharmonious lack of agreement in judgment persists, especially if it is so extreme that the interlocutors are entirely *estranged* from each other, feeling that the other is completely “blind” to what one is trying to convey, how can they get back into attunement? How can harmony (in an everyday sense) be restored? This leads us to the issue of what Cavell calls “criteria”, which essentially has to do with how we are led to regard something under one aspect rather than another.

Yet what *are* these criteria? Or more precisely: What *kind* or *class* of “something” are criteria? My suspicion is that this is a very hard question to answer in a “straight” manner, because the way Cavell talks, one gets the impression that criteria are extremely *polymorphous*. It all depends on where they are used and what for, suggesting that the most general thing one could say about criteria is that they do not necessarily have very much in common. Indeed, as Cavell asks in *The Claim of Reason*:

...why shouldn’t one say that there is a required appropriateness [type of criterion] with respect to each breed of thing (object or being), something appropriate for bread, something else for stones, something for large stones that block one’s path and something for small smooth stones that can be slung or shied; something for grass, for flowers, for orchards, for forests, for each fish of the sea and each fowl of the air; something for each human contrivance and for each human condition; and if you like, on up? For each link in the Great Chain of Being there is an appropriate hook of response. [Cavell 99: 441-42]

This is hardly conducive to a clear-cut doctrine of what criteria *are*. Thus as I understand Cavell, rather than rules, marks, features or any other single category, criteria constitute a “motley” of modes or “techniques” (to use Wittgensteinian terms) for reaching agreement in our various forms of life, modes and techniques as it were deeply embedded in our “ordinary” practices and “ordinary” language. Meaning that, using Wittgenstein’s imagery, criteria can be

compared to “sign-posts” that *guide* us when we try to come to decisions. But this is not the same as providing a *recipe* for judgment; typically, it is more on the order of a suggestion. Therefore I take it that the words “something like this” typically accompanies the laying down of Cavellian criteria. Rather than compel, criteria invite, like cues, understanding by appealing to the interlocutor’s attunement to the world, his or her perception of aspects and powers of projection, as expressed by the ongoing participation in various forms of life.

The above line of thought connects with what Cavell calls the PU’s “scene of instruction”, which we have in effect touched upon already. The scene quite simply consists in one person trying to explain something to another, typically by example, which includes talking about something in a certain way. The scene of instruction, if successful, could be conceived as an “illumination” where the “pupil” acknowledges, “now I can go on.” For instance, when the pupil has been shown a rabbit or a rabbit-shape in an instructive, that is “perspicacious” manner, the pupil should be able to recognize something bearing a family-resemblance to it, for instance exclaiming, as he or she “gets” the point, “so *that’s* what a rabbit is – *now* I realize what it was I saw in the field the other day – not a rat but a rabbit.” In short, the pupil is experiencing a *change of aspect*. I.e. the pupil is able to “see” and talk about the world in a novel manner, one that he or she hitherto had been oblivious to, and new connections reveal themselves. The relevant comparisons “dawn”, *en bloc*, on the pupil, as when Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty* that “light dawns gradually on the whole.” [Wittgenstein 99: §141]

In view of the considerations above I take the laying down of Cavellian criteria to be closely allied with Wittgenstein’s notion of comparisons with *paradigms*. That is, comparisons with “model” objects which feature in “model” judgments.⁶ Namely, in the PU (§131) there occurs the formulation:

For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison – as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond.⁷

⁶ Cp. Eli Friedlander’s ‘On examples, representatives, measures, standards, and the ideal’ [Crary 06].

⁷ And *Culture and Value* has it that the

...only way for us to guard our assertions against distortion – or avoid vacuity in our assertions, is to have a clear view of what the ideal is, namely an object of comparison – a yardstick, as it were – instead of making a prejudice of it to which everything has to conform. For this is what produces the dogmatism into which philosophy so easily degenerates. [Wittgenstein 80: 26]

Accordingly, a rabbit or rabbit-image which one is shown by an instructor (that is, for the purposes of instruction) can serve as a component of a “criterion” for rabbithood, which constitute a guide to the recognition of further rabbits, or if one wants, to the further deployment and inflection of the word “rabbit.” Only in this sense, as Wittgenstein points out, is there an “ideal” rabbit. Hence on this view there is no “Platonic” rabbit, merely a particular “ordinary” rabbit that serves the expository *function* of acting as a paradigm. In other words, a model acting as the first term in a *series* that the “pupil” eventually must be able to develop on his or her own accord (and one might add, his or her own *responsibility*.) The would-be paradigmatic rabbit *becomes* in this way exemplary – ideal-typical, normative – for what we are willing to call a “rabbit”.

In consequence of the above analysis, we could say that “criteria” (in all their polymorphous incarnations) are merely *heuristic* in the way they help us orient ourselves in the world. They give us something to “go on” when we judge, but they do not by themselves *determine* that judgment. By the same token we should recognize that criteria can lead our judgment in incompatible directions. Hence criteria do not *found* our agreement with others, nor our understanding of the world. Rather, because the very laying down of criteria supposes that we already has something in common to “go on”, one could say that the formulation of criteria in itself presupposes a certain level of attunement to the world and others. Thus, as Cavell points out, the formulation of criteria merely *expresses* our attunement, by giving it, on certain occasions, a more pointed articulation.

This returns us to our original question: What should one do when one finds oneself out of attunement with the world and one’s fellows? And the answer is: Examine what “sign-posts” guide your judgment, which is another way of saying that one should “recount” one’s criteria. Hence, in *The Claim of Reason* Cavell writes:

criteria are appealed to ... when we are lost with respect to our words and to the world they anticipate. Then we start finding ourselves by finding out and declaring the criteria upon which we are in agreement.
[Cavell 99: 34]

Through such an examination one might distinguish what diverging or obscure sign-posts hinder agreement by leading us to apprehend the world under incompatible *aspects*. Such a recounting of our “criteria” could lead to a recasting of how we speak, that is, to a renewed

consensus about which “pictures” ought to inform our judgment. *Then* we may find that we “agree in forms of life” again, that is, harmonize.

For instance, think of simple words like “put” and “feed”, and how they in various contexts are used to suggest a host of “images” that guide how we look at the world and judge about things and persons. Namely, as Cavell elaborates:

We could use a ... general verb like ‘put’, and say merely, ‘Put the money in the meter’, ‘Put new material into the machine’, ‘Put film into the camera’, etc. But first, that merely deprives us of a way of speaking which can discriminate differences which, in some instances, will be of importance; e.g., it does not discriminate between putting a flow of material into a machine and putting a part made of some new material into the construction of the machine. And it would begin to deprive us of the concept we have of the emotions. Is the idea of feeding pride or hope or anxiety, any more metaphorical, any less essential to the concept of an emotion, than the idea that pride and hope, etc., grow and moreover grow in certain circumstances? Knowing what sorts of circumstances these are and what the consequences and marks of overfeeding are, is part of knowing what pride is. And what other way is there of knowing? [Cavell 99: 181]

The hair-fine differentiations evoked above can, depending on the situation, lead a community of judges in either compatible or incompatible directions, that is, either divide or unite that community. The moral I gather from Cavell is that the nuances of use separating words like “put” and “feed” are both responsible for the richness of our apprehension of the world (and ourselves, and each other), *and* responsible for the constant danger of confusion and misunderstanding we live under. Hence, if our language had been possessed of a mechanical simplicity, we might not have misunderstood each other so easily; but then again, if our language had been like that, we might not have been humans.

The crucial point is that in terms of the “scene of instruction”, the multifarious and potentially confusing nature of our language implies that we in a sense must learn language all the time, and through such constant learning we maintain attunement, or if one wants, agreement in judgment. Hence the answer to the question we started with would be that in order to get back into agreement in judgment, we should in a sense repeat the “scene of instruction”, so that we are hopefully led to an aspect-change that brings our imaginations into harmony, saying in unison “now we can go on”.

This suggests that in a similar way as the first learning of language in childhood is the way we are brought into the community of intelligibility as such, so constant “re-learning” language is the key to *restoring* that attunement (or restoring that community.) In this sense we “grow together” through the countless ways we lose and find our attunement in everyday life, through the vicissitudes of “work and love”. But one should realize, as we have already indicated, that this is no guaranteed process, since our forms of life are inherently changing. The reason that we no longer manage to agree in the way we speak *may* be that a form of life is no longer viable, which means that a community of intelligibility is *dead*. (Which also would be to say that certain “pictures” of existence has lost their potency.) Then no amount of recounting criteria may save it. As the PU warns, the multiplicity of ways of using language

is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language
... come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten.
[Wittgenstein 58: 11]

On this note of caution, let us return to the issue of skepticism.

Where do we find ourselves?

The world as an immanently coherent whole

I would now like the reader to consider the following notion: Namely, it is a possible implication of the above discussion that what gives the world *substance* to us – makes it convincingly “real” to *us* – is the unity-in-manifold it maintains as we uncover it in various forms of life. In short, the world seems “real” to us because it appears, on its own immanent terms, coherent. Coherent and *engaging*. To employ a mixture of Heidegger and Cavell’s notions, it is *vis-à-vis* this coherence, and in this being-engaged (or being-concerned), that I am “attuned” to what I consider the “world.” This experience of coherence is what dictates what I would call my “sense of reality”. Indeed, it is the endless possibilities of thought and action that this immanent coherence offers me, of meaningful *exploration*, that makes the “world” seem inexhaustible to me and thus as something that has the potential to fill *all* of my existence, as opposed to any ordinary object, which only fills parts of my possible experience.

Granted, this does not prove, from an absolute viewpoint, that what we call the world *is* real. What it arguably does, however, is to give us an “everyday” yardstick for forming an opinion of what is real and not: Namely that it “fits” in the environment that appears to us as *the* world,

the world which we are “in”.⁸ Hence, if someone claims that gargoyles are real, I would naturally ask him to explain to me how that creature would fit within the immanent coherence that I already am familiar with. That is, I would ask questions like: Where do they live, what do they eat, why have they not been recognized by science, etc.? Meaning that I would demand a “story” as to how the gargoyle fits with the rest of what I take to constitute the “world”. Which is to say, borrowing a phrase from P. F. Strawson, that I would ask my interlocutor to place the gargoyle within the context of the elements of my “mutually supportive natural metaphysics”. [Strawson 85: 29] Because such a “natural metaphysics”, in the perspective I am developing, *is* nothing but the world as an immanently coherent whole.

In terms of Heidegger’s *late* philosophy, we could say that what characterizes what we call the “world”, is that the various parts of it “condition” (“be-thing”) each other. That is, the various parts of the world *depend* on each other for their own subsistence and substantiality. Hence they are in a sense “mutually supportive”; i.e. while none of them are ground, they all support each other. In ‘Texts of Recovery (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Heidegger...)⁹ Cavell draws attention to this aspect of Heidegger’s essay ‘The Thing’, where Heidegger writes that:

If we let the thing be present in its thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as thing Thinking in this way, we are called by the thing as the thing. In the strict sense of the German word *bedingt*, we are the be-tinged, the conditioned ones. We have left behind us the presumption of unconditionedness [Heidegger 01: 178].

Hence our ability to apprehend “things as things” in a complexly differentiated *and* integrated manner is what makes the world appear to us *as* a world, populated by objects and people, one of which is my “self”. Meaning that the Heideggerian worldliness of the world (in its “worlding”) is understood in terms of how it appears or is uncovered to us in its density, elasticity and continuity, in brief, in its immanent *coherence*. And as I have just suggested, these are traits which define my own substantiality as a *self in the world*, that is, the worldliness of my own subjectivity. I.e. the worldliness of my “Dasein”, my there-being, which is also in a sense coherent. By realizing this we have, as Heidegger puts it, “left behind us the presumption of unconditionedness”. We *acknowledge* that we depend on the things of the world not merely for material sustenance, but for our very selfhood, as the things of the world depend on each

⁸ Considering this preposition, in the manner of *Being and Time*, to designate the *existential* being-in.

⁹ In [Cavell 94b].

other for their very *thinghood*. To borrow John Donne's phrase, no man, and no thing, is an island.

Yet we have still not "proved" the ultimate realness of the world. Rather, we have indicated that there *is* no non-circular way of *knowing* what makes the world "real", ultimately speaking. The world appears real to me because it appears to me *as* a world, and, since I am familiar with no other similarly coherent whole, it appears to me as *the* world, by the standards of realness *it* offers. Hence, if anything is to be judged real, it must, as far as *I* am concerned, be judged in relation to *this* world. Correspondingly, since I learned *my* language in *my* life (in Wittgensteinian "scenes of instruction"), I don't even know how to speak, apart from with words drawn from forms of life in *this* world, about *another* world. In short, this is the world where we "find" ourselves, and each other; this is the world, in the locution of *Being and Time*, into which we are *thrown*. Still – this does not bring me one step closer to *proving* that there cannot be any other world, in relation to which mine would be "unreal".

What is important, though, is that while the experience of the world as an immanently coherent whole does not necessarily render a skeptical perspective senseless, it *does* go to show why skepticism is typically not our dominant perspective, and why the skeptical crisis might be regarded as an exception in our life-histories, demanding an unusual exertion of fantasy or logical acumen, rather than something that would "ordinarily" concern us. Put another way, one might surmise that if the skeptic took the "ordinary" world seriously, on its own premises, the concomitant ordinary concerns would eventually draw him away from his skeptical speculations. There would simply be too many other things to attend to, draining the energy (or "libido") from his skeptical fantasies. Hence we might think that the skeptical perspective demands that we *bracket* those ordinary concerns, and somehow stand aloof of the world as an immanently coherent whole, trying to conceptualize it from a more "fundamental" perspective. This means that we must in a sense be "blind" to the ways in which the world ordinarily concerns us, the ways it lays claim to our interest and desire. Indeed, as Wittgenstein suggests in *On Certainty* a certain physical and mental withdrawal – perhaps brought on by intense philosophical studies – might be necessary in order to accomplish such a bracketing, which takes us out of what Husserl might have called the "natural" attitude. *Then* the world, and our ways of ordinarily talking about it, might emerge as "groundless", that is, totally contingent and arbitrary, lost in a sea of impenetrable "nothingness".

From this analysis could be extracted the distinction between:

1. The perspective of *imagination* (in our specific sense), which is that of the world we encounter in seeing, hearing, tasting etc., i.e. the “ordinary” world we talk about in “everyday” language, an immanently coherent whole comprising *relative* distinctions between “real” and “unreal”.
2. The perspective of *speculation*, which is that of the world as conceptualized on the basis of an idea of transcendent grounding, which operates with some *absolute* notion of reality and unreality, or say, reality and *illusion*.

We will proceed with this in mind.

The relative disjointness of skeptical doubts

To summarize our progress so far, we have argued that while in the perspective of imagination the world *appears* as an immanently coherent whole (or we appear to ourselves as situated within such a whole), it may still in the perspective of speculation be *thought* of as transcendentally groundless. Yet these while perspectives may be combined, they are in a sense relatively disjoint. To take an example: Let us say that I possess a cardboard figure of a car, and I say that it is not a real car, it is just an illusion. In this case I am *comparing* the “fake” car to a “real” car, demonstrating that the two-dimensional object does not “fit in” with the three dimensional ones. Thus my statement has a self-contained, “immanent” significance; the reason for that, as I have just suggested, is that we *have* opportunities for comparison, opportunities in *this* world. But then I might proceed to say that it is not only the cardboard car that is illusory, it is our whole world. Yet, how could we explicate this claim with comparison to anything; how could we indicate that our world fails to “fit in” with something *more* real, as the fake car fails to fit in among real cars?

Accordingly, on my analysis, the first claim to a distinction between the real and the unreal is tied up with our Wittgensteinian “imagination”, our *attunement* to the world as an immanently coherent whole in various concrete and substantial forms of life. While the other claim has a more “speculative” nature, being tied up with some unspecified distinction not between a fake and a real *object*, but between a fake and a real *world*, which leaves us in doubt as to which

“criteria” ought to be applied in order to settle the matter. And the reason for this problem, on the account I have been giving, is that we have learned to judge the realness of cars, teeth, smiles, promises, etc. in specific “scenes of instruction”; yet no such scene of instruction has been available, at least not in *this* world, to distinguish between real and false *worlds*. (What would be an example?) That is, in trying to give meaning to the speculative distinction between a real world and a fake world we experience a marked lack of what Wittgenstein might call “traction”. In his famous words:

We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! [PU §107]

Still, by the same token, we have problems with articulating in a non-circular way exactly what it is that makes *this* world “real” (beyond that it provides us with friction); hence there *is* still an opening for skepticism. This lack of non-circular assurance invites, in the skeptical mind, the query of what is “behind” our world; the worry whether this “super-object” is supported by something, or if it is hanging on “nothing”, suspended over some kind of abyss or void. In short, this lack of non-circular assurances raises, to suspicious minds, the issue of the world’s *transcendent ground*. And indeed there *might* be some criterion, unknown to us (or to humans in general) that shows the “illusory” character of our world. *God* might possess such a criterion, and it would hardly be right to claim that our analysis of the world as an immanently coherent whole has ruled out the existence of God. It has, at best, ruled out that “God” is the name of an ordinary object or person, which is entirely in keeping with, say, the theistic metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. In fact, Thomas has worked out this distinction with great care in his *Summa*.¹⁰

An alternative way out of skepticism

Reconsidering our “real needs”

What our analysis has shown us is not that skeptical doubts necessarily are meaningless (which Malcolm, as well as Baker & Hacker claims), but that they tend to be *detachable* from our “ordinary” perspective on life, that is, from the perspective of the world we “find” ourselves in. This indicates the difference between the skeptic and, say, the Christian: The latter does not

¹⁰ Cf. [Thomas 64]: *Summa*, Volume 3, on “Knowing and Naming God”.

merely doubt that our world is the ultimate reality; he or she claims that Jesus Christ, as a historical person, was both God and Man, that we will be saved or damned, etc. I.e. there is a positive dimension there as well. Thus skeptical “doubt” cannot be put on par with Christian (or any other) “faith”, even though both challenges our conceptions about the “immanent” world, claiming that it may not be “all”. Thus it would, in general, be qualitatively different to “live” one’s skepticism and to “live” one’s supernaturalist creed. The crux is that say the Christian ties his or her beliefs into our everyday concerns in a more substantial way than the skeptic does; indeed religious faith *is* a substantial part of everyday life to an enormous number of people. What makes the skeptical doubts so uniquely “detachable” is that they are *mere* doubts: The skeptic puts nothing affirmative in place of what he questions. Hence the skeptic can appeal to the (possible) existence of God (or an evil demon) as a ground for doubt, but not as an article of faith. This is what makes skepticism “Hamletian”: Its doubts have no content beyond doubt itself. The skeptic does not express a positive creed, but merely articulates an existential anxiety, a sense of unfoundedness.

In sum, the detachability of skeptical doubts (rather than their intrinsic falsity or absurdity) is what indicates that we have a *choice* in the matter of how we regard our human condition. The problem is therefore, in Wittgensteinian terms, one of will rather than of intellect. That is, in the Big Typescript he writes:

DIFFICULTY OF PHILOSOPHY NOT THE INTELLECTUAL
DIFFICULTY OF THE SCIENCES, BUT THE DIFFICULTY OF A
CHANGE OF ATTITUDE. RESISTANCES OF THE WILL MUST
BE OVERCOME.

On this line of thought we could surmise that we don’t *have* to be skeptics unless we exert ourselves to be skeptical. Conversely, if we have become skeptical, we do not necessarily need to remain so. Namely, the possibility of a choice resides in the fact that the skeptical point of view is, as we have argued, *disjoint* from the “ordinary” perspective. It could be discarded and yet everything would in a sense “remain the same”, as Wittgenstein puts it. Hence, as I understand the Wittgensteinian “therapy”, its aim is to show us that we have the opportunity to not be skeptics. There *are* other ways of thinking about our world and our relations to our peers, entirely disjoint, or orthogonal, to the speculative perspective of skepticism. (In comparison, the religious perspective could be said to be more “parallel” to everyday life than

“orthogonal” to it, hence Wittgenstein put great stress on distancing Christianity – as a form of life – from metaphysical speculation.¹¹) In consequence, the most important reason to not be a skeptic is not that skepticism is necessarily false and meaningless; the most important reason would be that one does not *want* to, nor *need* to, be a skeptic. And one reason for this desire to not be a skeptic, as Wittgenstein intimates, is the fear (perhaps related to the fear of madness and isolation, as emphasized by Cavell) that skeptical speculations draw us away from what he calls (without much specification) our “real needs.” Hence one’s attitude to skepticism becomes an existential as much as an epistemological issue.

This brings in an interesting perspective: What is crucial is not to evaluate whether our world is real or not (whatever that might mean), but whether the *needs* our ways of living and talking reflect are. Then we might ask: Are our philosophical-skeptical speculations addressing our real needs as human beings? Is the time, taken out of our finite existence, used in this way of living and talking well spent? This mortal question, one might surmise, is what constitutes the core of the Wittgensteinian “dark night of the soul”, his bitter searching of the heart, and the crisis of conscience that prompted him to regard his logic and his sins in the same light.

Acknowledgment, work and love

From certainty to satisfaction

On this view, I would like to suggest, the most pressing reason that one should not want to be a skeptic would be the fear that one’s skepticism is turning one into Hamlet. Hence, if there is any such thing as “skeptical anxiety”, there might also be something to be called “anxiety of becoming a skeptic.” In other words, the fear of becoming a skeptic could be interpreted as a fear of losing touch with the world, or what is truly *important* in the world. By implication, one could take it that Wittgenstein in the PU is suggesting that a non-skeptical life would simply be a *better life*, and correspondingly, expressing anxiety that he should miss out on that life if he succumbs to skeptical temptation. Thus a non-skeptical life does not necessarily mean that we have arrived at “certainty” regarding the realness of our world, nor that we have proved the worry to be absurd; it might merely mean that we have chosen to regard issues of assurance and authenticity in a more immanent way. We have so to speak chosen to “detach” the

¹¹ This is evidenced for instance by his diary, and his conversations with Drury.

skeptical doubts from our everyday life, in order to concentrate more fully on “worldly” concerns, which I designate with the Hegelian-Freudian epithet “work and love”.

Indeed, if we return to Heidegger’s essay ‘The Thing’, this detachment from skepticism could be considered as a decision to *acknowledge* that our human existence is “conditioned” by the things of *this* world, the world which, in his idiom, “worlds”. Hence the immanent world, as immanent, conditions us *as* humans, or as Heidegger might call it, mortals. The immanent world is, so to speak our “element”, and should as such be treated with respect. But the validity of this precept can of course not be strictly *proven* (to be sure, it can hardly be strictly stated); it can only be regarded or disregarded, disclosing itself *in the way we live*, namely in the *reverence* (or lack of it) we show the immanent world. We can only existentially *assent to*, without proof, that *this* world is *our* world. Consequently, in ‘The Thing’ it is suggested that our acknowledgment of the world that “be-things” us could be expressed in more or less cultic ways, such as pouring libations into a cup and then onto the ground (in the manner of ancient Greece), recognizing the world as a “gift” and reciprocating in kind. Indeed the holding capacity of the cup is to Heidegger a symbol of how the world provides space for us humans. As he writes:

When we fill the jug, the pouring that fills it flows into the empty jug. The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel's holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel ... But if the holding is done by the jug's void, then the potter who forms sides and bottom on his wheel does not, strictly speaking, make the jug. He only shapes the clay. No – he shapes the void ... The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds. [Heidegger 01: 167.]

Here Heidegger is suggesting a connection between the ritual function of the cup and the devoted craftsmanship that produces it.¹² Thus a more “secular” way of expressing remembrance of our dependence on the thingliness of things, and their intimate relation to the “void”, is through works of art, paradigmatically poetry as it is discussed, and in part enacted, in Heidegger’s later works.¹³ In either case we are expressing what Heidegger calls

¹² Cf. Heidegger on the work of art in [Heidegger 01], as well as for his notion of “earth”.

¹³ For instance, in ‘The Thinker as Poet’ Heidegger writes:

The oldest of the old follows behind
us in our thinking and yet it
comes to meet us.

“Gelassenheit”; we are *letting things be*, without trying to get “behind” them in the speculative sense. Thus to Heidegger skeptical anxiety turns to awe and wonder in the face of the mystery of a world that *is*. This implies detaching from the restless *desire* for absolute knowledge, which is also a highly Wittgensteinian precept, from early to late in his work, and at the root of his “quietism”. To quote the *Tractatus*:

It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.
[6.44]

Correspondingly, to shift back to more Freudian and Hegelian terms, our acknowledgement of the immanent world expresses itself in the extent to which our desire, detached from the skeptical yearning for absolute assurances, is channeled into the substantiality of “work and love”.

Hence, whether one takes a Heideggerian-Wittgensteinian or Hegelian-Freudian approach, if there is any way of deciding what is the “right” perspective, the skeptical or non-skeptical, it must be in terms of which provides us the most profound human *satisfaction*. And being satisfied is not necessarily the same thing as being certain, even though the skeptic seems to think so. Indeed, the point, as I understand those thinkers, is that these issues diverge: The issue of certainty leads to a humanly unsatisfying (and unsatisfiable) concern for “unconditioned” knowledge, while the issue of satisfaction leads to a concern for “conditioned” acknowledgement of the world and others, which is incompatible with a restless quest for absolute certainty. This leaves us with the fateful choice: Do you want to seek “private” certainty, say in the absoluteness of the cogito, or do you want to seek “public” satisfaction, say

That is why thinking holds to the coming of what has been, and is remembrance. [Heidegger 01: 10]

To wit, this kind of valuation of poetical discourse is indicated by Heidegger already in *Being and Time* when he contends that poetry demonstrates the peculiar way we are “in” the world. He writes that in “poetical” discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one’s [being-in-the-world] can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence.” [Heidegger 02: 205] In other words, we are “in” the world by being attuned to it in language; and poetry, which does not have a “practical” purpose, brings this implicit attunement to the fore. “In talking”, Heidegger elaborates

...Dasein expresses itself not because it has, in the first instance been encapsulated as something ‘internal’ over against something outside, but because as Being-in-the-world is already ‘outside’ when it understands. What is expressed is precisely this Being-outside – that is to say, the way in which one currently has [an attunement], which we have shown pertains to the full disclosedness of Being-in. Being-in and its [attunement] are made known in discourse and indicated in language by intonation, modulation, the tempo of talk, ‘the way of speaking’. [Heidegger 02: 205]

participating in the world of the family and the polis, in acceptance of the “everyday” commitments that come with it? And this latter commitment can be regarded as a commitment to ordinary language as well, as opposed to the notion of an “ideal” language. So what is your “real need”? In which direction does the “axis of investigation” lead you?

II. The problem of the self

Moral perfectionism and the transgressiveness of Cavell's “politics of interpretation”

The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgment upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world.¹⁴

Now, what I have done so far is, to the best of my ability, to connect some of the points that Cavell has offered regarding attunement, judgment, language and skepticism in his various texts, along with elements of Wittgenstein and Heidegger's thought, also according to what I understand to be Cavell's own suggestions (including the Freudian and Hegelian connections from the previous chapters.) If you will, I have attempted to piece together some of the fragmented views of “being in language” that Cavell has scattered through his work. The main difference from Cavell's own writings on the subject is that I have tried to be more “direct” (especially when it comes to the question of what we mean by “the world” and “real”, and how these words can gain more or less skeptical inflections), which is the reason that I have deliberately let Cavell's presence, along with the endless modifications and qualifications of his own statements, recede somewhat into the background during the last pages.

The picture I have come up with is something like this: (1) We learn language through “scenes of instruction”, chiefly by following examples. (2) This learning-process is essentially “imaginative”, in the sense that we apprehend and “project” the examples (paradigms) according to our own *judgment*. (4) We “agree in judgment” because we are more or less

¹⁴ [Cavell 04: 2]

“attuned” to each other and the world, which issues in various *forms of life*. (5) Yet confusion, and ultimately skeptical crisis, is always possible because our agreement in the end depend *only* on this attunement, which lacks a “transcendent” grounding. (6) This leads us to the consideration that what we call the “real” world is nothing but the immanently coherent whole that we are attuned to in judgment, and which we are familiar with from our forms of life. (7) This means that the skeptic is essentially right to claim that we don’t know anything for “certain” in an *absolute* sense; all our everyday criteria of certainty are *relative* to that immanently coherent whole, that is, to our forms of life, and therefore in a sense “circular”. (8) Yet we also realize that such skeptical claims are in their very nature “detachable” from our “ordinary” concerns. (9) Hence we realize that even if we cannot disprove skepticism, we can *choose* a non-skeptical attitude to life, concentrating our interest and desire on the substantial satisfactions of “work and love”, as they offer themselves in the immanently coherent world-whole of our practices, rather than on the pursuit of absolute certainty.

And there the drama closes. Or does it?

Because the question still remains: Is this really what *Cavell* wants to tell us? As I indicated in the previous section, I am pretty sure that Freud, Hegel, Wittgenstein and (in a mythopoetically inflected sense) Heidegger could be made out to suggest something like this; but *Cavell*? And as it turns out my contention is, despite Cavell’s partial affinity for all these thinkers: Not really. That is, not *entirely*. Indeed, if this is all he wanted to communicate, there would be no need for his elaborate “modernist” philosophical style.

So where is the catch? What *do* I think have been overlooked or underplayed in my own account? And the answer is: Cavell’s “politics of interpretation”, which is what is reflected in his modernist philosophical style, ultimately pointing to a radical problematic of the *self*. The problem with my account in *that* perspective, is that it offers too much closure, or rather, that it closes prematurely. Which in yet other words could be said to imply that I terminate the “drama” with a *false reconciliation*. In Cavell’s terms, I fail to keep open the drama that allows life to be a “continuous baptism”, which is what urges us to live life in constant enactment of more utopian notions of the self and its redemption. Meaning that while my account may have removed us to a fairly safe distance from the slippery slope of skeptical doubt, it may in turn have moved us excessively close to that *other* slippery slope Cavell is concerned about; the slippery slope of *dogmatism*. We could say that my account, terminating in the existential

closure offered by an immersion in the “adult” world of work and love, is to “straight” to sit well with the romantic-anarchist leanings of Cavell’s philosophical modernism, or if you want, with his moral perfectionism. Or as he calls it, “Emersonian” moral perfectionism, a “dimension” of the moral life that “places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one’s society” [Cavell 90: 2] Thus we shall see that we cannot, in Cavell’s view, put skepticism entirely behind us; its shadow will always be with us as, so to speak, the habitual deformation of the one who perpetually questions the “status quo”, the *free thinker*, unabashedly pushing the problematic of the self.

The problem with “agreement on the whole”

Where is the voice of the individual self?

As we shall now see, there is an identifiable reason for our problem, buried in the discussion I have undertaken regarding “agreement in judgment”. Namely, I have constantly assumed that the agreement in judgment we have been considering is “on the whole”. And behind the caveat “on the whole” there is hidden a legion of *compromises*. By this I mean that when I have been supposing that we “on the whole” arrive at agreement in everyday life, I have taken no stock of the “quality” of that agreement. Everything that terminates, or forestalls, an argument “counts” in this process of arriving at what is in essence a *lack of dissent*. For instance, there is no reason that a real-life “scene of instruction” should not take the form of rote learning or sheer indoctrination, where the pupil in the end quite mechanically comes to “agree” with the teacher. Hence, in the kind of everyday agreement I have been discussing, there is no reason that factors such as laziness, incompetence, coincidence, subservience to authority, etc. should not have had a hand in the formation of agreement in judgment. I.e. in the account I have been giving there is no reason to even *hope* that taste should prevail over tastelessness, that the expert’s advice should move the opinion of the crowd, etc. All that matters is that there is a certain coherence; and if that is the coherence of stupidity or repression, so be it. If all the scientists in the world were massacred by an angry mob the ensuing tyranny of ignorance would, in this sense, be an “agreement in judgment” as good as any. And if all the works of the great composers were burned (like the books of Alexandria) we should on *this* account be in no position to deplore it, as long as a new musical consensus emerges from the ashes (as it has, in a sense, already done in the “music industry.”) In short, on the model I have been outlining, the

voice of the *individual self* has no intrinsic weight. And the reason for this, technically speaking, is that I have regarded linguistic normativity to be distributed in such a manner that the “individual voice” potentially disappears from the equation. As long as the *form of life* keeps operating (or gets replaced by one that does) we are still in business normatively speaking. In this sense we could say that overall agreement in judgment *is* something that concerns the “crowd”; that it is intrinsically a species of *conformity*.

This, as I understand it, is the dilemma which Cavell struggles with in his attempt to combine Emerson’s ‘Self-Reliance’ and other anti-conformist works with the PU’s rather anti-individualist notion of “forms of life” (each one regarded as a kind of “organism” unto itself, operating on a supra-personal level). This also invites the thought that Cavell becomes correspondingly hostile to readings of the PU that tend to exacerbate this problem, which borders on the ethico-political. Indeed, in the light of these considerations we realize that it is the handling of the role of the individual self or voice in Kripke’s rule-oriented account of Wittgenstein (explaining agreement in judgment entirely as a product of the *compromises* between private “inclinations”) that prompts Cavell to comment that

I feel sure my sense of Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s solution to the crisis as more skeptical than the problem it is designed to solve is tied up with my sense that this solution is a particular kind of political solution, one in which the issue of the newcomer for society is whether to accept his or her efforts to imitate us, the thing Emerson calls conformity. The scene thus represents the permanent crisis of a society that conceives of itself as based on consent. [Cavell 90: 76]

Hence, on my interpretation Cavell realizes that he has a dilemma on his hands in trying to combine Emerson’s strident “self-reliance” with Wittgenstein’s potentially semi-collectivist notion of “forms of life”, and he naturally resents that the readings of Kripke, Malcolm, Baker and Hacker etc. only makes it worse. Now, one way out of this dilemma is to in a sense “grade” judgment according to its degree of “spontaneity”, i.e. according to the degree in which the agreement arise for reasons that are *intrinsic* to the “selves” in question. Another way of putting this, would be to say that one shifts one’s attention from actual to “ideal” agreement in judgment. Ideal or spontaneous here *means*, literally, “with no compromises”. But how does one evaluate which determinants of judgment count as intrinsic to the judging subject, and which determinants count as enforced compromises?

Against the interchangeability of subjects
Cavell's distaste for formal standards of agreement
The "classical" view; Cavell and Rawls

What I will call the "classical" approach to this question, and which I will describe in mere outline, is that one supposes that there should be no *non-rational* constraints imposing on judgment.¹⁵ Thus the idea is, in generic terms, that if reason obeys only reason, it is not making any compromises; it is autonomous rather than heteronomous. The upshot, in contemporary language, is that the "dialogue" leading towards agreement should in principle take place in an "ideal" rational community, with no time-constraints. This, it might be said, gives us a standard to measure our "real-world" discussions against. Thus on the "classical" view judgment is regarded as spontaneous when it is entirely "rational", which means, in this context, that it is essentially argumentative. And when is it argumentative? When it is appealing to universal or "universiable" principles. And which are these? Essentially the ones based on formal logic, in particular the principles of "contradiction" and the "excluded third". The thrust, of course, of this focus on formality resides in the idea of operating in a *procedural* manner, aiming for a form of consensus that automatically tends to exclude the distortions of superstition, power-relations, or for that matter, plain stupidity.

This "classical" approach has many variations and fields of application, and in a sense cuts across distinctions of theoretical and practical reason. What is central is that one maintains a certain symmetry between subjects, which entails that one is treating them as *interchangeable*. Thus in the *political* context, if one in laying down the basic principles of the state abstracts from everything that pertains to the particular individual, qua particular, one would not incur any "injustices", i.e. one's judgment would be impartial, or as John Rawls puts it, "above reproach". That is, on the Rawlsian model in *A Theory of Justice*, the "ideal" consensus is anticipated by what he calls a "reflective equilibrium", which is achieved when the judger

¹⁵ Indeed, what is at stake here is not this view itself, but Cavell's reaction to it; in Chapter 9 I shall discuss how Cavell perhaps could have appropriated some elements of it in a more constructive manner. One should note, however, that a central preoccupation of what I regard as the "classical" approach is the issue of "principles", principles as such, which in the contemporary form translates into a concern with procedures. For an example of this approach, see chapter I, section 1, of [Habermas 1984]. See also the discussion of Cavell in relation to Habermas in chapter 5 of [Hammer 02].

impartially abstracts from his or her personal concerns in the process of reasoning.¹⁶ This is dramatized as judging behind a “veil of ignorance”, a hypothetical situation where one is constructing a political order on behalf of a subject about which one knows nothing apart from that it *is* a subject, interchangeable with every other. The aim, according to Rawls, is to reduce the asymmetry between subjects to a level where only those are left that on the whole benefit the weakest members of society, a notion he works out in terms of the mathematical theory of rational choice, specifically, as the solution to an *a priori* “maximin” problem, minimizing the “worst case” scenario for a random subject.¹⁷

The problem, however, is that to Cavell such rather narrow paradigms of rationality, whether practical or theoretical, are in themselves an imposition on the self, rendering it what we could call “unspontaneous”. Hence, to Cavell it must seem that what Rawls “really recommends is conformism”. [Hammer 02: 141] To wit, we have gradually shifted from a discussion of the self, to a discussion of formal determinants of judgment, to a discussion of the mathematical model of rational choice. Thus the definition of “public” reason to be extracted from the above considerations tends to be co-extensive with supra-personality, or the proverbial “view from nowhere”. But *who* has the view from nowhere? Everybody? Or nobody? Accordingly, as Cavell writes in CH&UH, criticizing Rawls’ principle-based (i.e. formal), non-comprehensive notion of justice (and by the same token, of “public” reason):

It seems to me that Rawls is taking encouragement from the proof concerning the resolution for the original position, to regard “above reproach” as a rational response to the question of affirming a plan of life in our actual society. Whereas this bottom line is not a response to but a refusal of further conversation. [Cavell 90: xxv]

What I understand to be Cavell’s worry, is that in the process where one excludes superstition, power-relations, stupidity, etc., from judgment one is also excluding the individual self qua self. And this might be laudable if what one was looking for was *only* a notion of a very *specific* form of “public” reason (which I in Chapter 9 will argue that Cavell is rather

¹⁶ An approach Rawls contrasts to what he regards as that of “perfectionism”, from Aristotle to Nietzsche.

¹⁷ For some ideas towards an alternative criticism of Rawls’ apriorism, cf. [Eldridge 89]. As I read it Eldridge’s implicit “solution” to this circle of problems is to interpret much the same concerns as those motivating Rawls in terms of a posteriori principles, worked out immanently in social life (or its novelistic treatment), thus lifting the veil of ignorance. As I will suggest in Chapter 9, however, I think that due to his philosophical modernism Cavell’s relation to matters of principle, and thus to social institutions, is more radical and difficult than Eldridge’s. In short, while Eldridge is content with adopting a softened, a posteriori version of the “classical” approach to principles, Cavell is committed, due to his avant-garde philosophical-literary strategies, to a less compromising stance, flagging the idiosyncrasies of the singular subject in a mannerist fashion.

insensitive to, especially in the context – as in Plato’s *Republic* – of articulating the principles that shall inform our *institutions*¹⁸); but what *we* were looking for, in answer to Cavell’s dilemma, is a conception of reason, or better: autonomy, that comprises the individual, situated self, rather than excludes it. Namely, according to the “classical” procedural standards of reason very few things of “comprehensive” importance to the human self turns out to be rationally discussable, leaving them to non-rational preference, which means that the individual self *per se* tends to be, in effect, regarded as non-rational. Thus, on the classical view, as long as they are not capable of “generating determinate agreement under procedural constraints, moral debates contain no claim to rationality.” [Hammer 02: 122] Correspondingly, if this *impersonal* model becomes coextensive with rationality as such, and the political as such, it seems that these things have little to do with our lives as individual selves. In defiance of this tendency to excise the singular “I” from the philosophical discussion, one might even say in *protest* of it, Cavell writes in CH&UH that

What justifies what I do and say is, I feel like saying, *me* – the fact that I can respond to an indefinite range of responses of the other ... The requirement of [procedural] purity imposed by philosophy now looks like a wish to leave *me* out, I mean each of us, the self, with its arbitrary needs and unruly desires. [Cavell 90: 77]

Hence when looked at with Cavellian eyes the ideal standards of “public” rationality typically enforced along the “classical” politico-philosophical lines of thought would in themselves compromise the spontaneity of individual judgment. It would mean submission to a notion of agreement that is, if not authoritarian, then at least conformist, and which obscures the place of the self *as* self in the community of intelligibility. It would, in short, leave “me” out.

Attunement revisited

An ideal of situated autonomy

We could say that what Cavell is looking for is an ideal of *situated autonomy*, an ideal that pertains to the particular individual in its concrete context. Namely, what I see as Cavell’s attempted way out of the dilemma, trying to circumvent both the excessively “brute” and the excessively “formal” notions of agreement in judgment (either alienating the individual voice),

¹⁸ Cavell admits in CH&UH that he is not sure of the extent and nature of his disagreement with Rawls; I think this failure to get to the bottom of his relationship with the classical politico-philosophical approach is at the root of the dilemmas and obscurities we shall discuss at the end of the dissertation.

is to radicalize his notion of “attunement”. Thus to Cavell, ideal or fully “spontaneous” agreement in judgment would equal *perfect attunement*. The paradigmatic image of “spontaneous” agreement then would be, rather than a conclusion arrived at through the rational “freedom” of logical inference, that of a number of voices singing together in harmony, no voice subservient to any other. I.e. this perfect attunement would not merely be “formal”; it would comprise our sensuous and emotional capabilities as well. But this suggests that the relevant ideal of judgment comes very close to the one that Kant outlined as the one informing *aesthetical* judgment (as we shall explore in the next chapter). Writes Cavell:

...Kant’s characterization of the aesthetic judgment models the relevant philosophical claim to voice what we should ordinarily say when, and what we should mean in saying it. The moral is that while general agreement with these claims can be “imputed” or “demanded” by philosophers, they cannot, as in the case of more straightforward empirical judgments, “postulate” this agreement (using Kant’s terms). [Cavell 05: 9]

Namely, this more indeterminate ideal of agreement does not only hold out the prospect of a mere supra-personal judgment, nor the mere sum of all our private inclinations – it holds out a utopian vision of the *reconciliation* of our individual voices in a *common voice*. That is, the reconciliation of our individual voices in a perfectly harmonious community. Because, notes Cavell, the 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 upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and the search for community are the wish and search for reason. [Cavell 99: 20, my italic]

Thus a merely formal notion of agreement in judgment is not enough for Cavell, nor the mere mathematical solution to a maximin problem; he wants our idea of agreement to be informed by a more “comprehensive” notion of “reason”. Because only then is our agreement in judgment, such as it stands, expressive of a continuous *search for true community*, imagined independently of all compromises, including the political and economical compromises of liberal “civilization”, as well as the intellectual compromises of various forms of “rationalism”

(including the “critical” variants.) Only then would the judgers aspire to form what we could call a genuine unity-in-manifold, a perfect whole, where every individual voice is as important as any other. And *not* only, crucially, in forming judgments regarding general principles, but also in forming what one could call comprehensive value-judgments, which is what makes Cavell’s ideal notion of reason “perfectionist”. Hence in the Cavellian vision, *true* community and *true* rationality would go together in creating a perfect social whole where we are *attuned* from “top to bottom”, also sensuously and emotively (to the extent these dimensions could be factored out at all), so that we are able to live in an orderly manner yet without anyone relinquishing their individual voices. This vision, one might say, is what expresses our *hope* that we will agree in a comprehensive manner, and which makes discourse and discussion meaningful even in the absence of procedural criteria of success.

The scene of instruction revisited

A utopian vision of community

Of course this is merely a utopian vision; yet it provides the “moral perfectionist” the motivation, in everyday life, to seek a *transgression* of what he or she perceives as the false reconciliations that are based on the compromises of “present” society. And crucially, this process of transgression could be imagined as going on indefinitely, so that only in the infinite limit each and every voice finds itself included in the community of intelligibility in an uncompromising manner. This reveals the deeper reason behind Cavell’s attachment to the “scene of instruction” in the PU. Because, as Cavell writes in CH&UH:

I conceive that the good teacher will not say, ‘This is simply what I do’ as a threat to discontinue his or her instruction, as if to say: ‘I am right; do it my way or leave my sight.’ The teacher’s expression of inclination in what is to be said shows readiness – (unconditional) willingness – to continue presenting himself as an example, as the representative of the community into which the child is being, let me say, invited and initiated. [Cavell 90: 72]

The way Cavell paints this scene it is no merely empirical learning-process, which may be marred by all kinds of compromise. Namely, what Cavell is stressing is the *patience* of the teacher, resting on his spade, waiting, indefinitely if need be, for the pupil to respond in his or her own *voice* – “in which case my justification may be furthered by keeping still”, as Cavell puts it. [Cavell 90: 77] It is the teacher’s patient gesture of *invitation*, his stillness, his repose,

waiting in uncompromising openness for the other's voice to assert itself, which resonates with the utopian side of Cavell's philosophical modernism, an utopianism that is as much "intellectual" as it is "emotional" as it is "sensuous" as it is "political". Indeed, it is part of his "politics of interpretation" to not distinguish too tightly between those dimension of the human life, and thus, of philosophy.

Hence what is lacking from the type of account that I attempted initially, as well as from what Cavell takes to be a Rawlsian view of public life, is Cavell's perfectionist notion of the so-called "eventual" ordinary (which is always just beyond the horizon), and concomitantly, the notion of life as a *constant* crisis of redemption, which implies a constant challenge to the compromises (including compromises of what might be called "taste", a sphere of judgment that the formalists would hardly consider "political" at all) effected by the society I find myself in. Therefore, in an "Emersonian" view of democracy, argues Cavell:

To speak for oneself politically is to speak for the others with whom you consent to association, and it is to consent to be spoken for by them—not as a parent speaks for you, i.e., instead of you but as someone in mutuality speaks for you, i.e., speaks your mind. Who these others are, for whom you speak and by whom you are spoken for, is not known a priori, though it is in practice generally treated as given. To speak for yourself then means risking the rebuff—on some occasion, perhaps once for all—of those for whom you claimed to be speaking; and it means risking having to rebuff—on some occasion, perhaps once for all—those who claim to be speaking for you. [Cavell 99: 27]

On Cavell's interpretation what Emerson (or "Emerson", *his* Emerson) is defending *is* the right – and duty – to present oneself as exemplary in a comprehensive manner, and not only anonymously and formally (conforming to the manner of judging behind the "veil" in Rawls); which according to Cavell can be understood as a profoundly democratic notion rather than the opposite, and one that imbues democratic society with a dimension of the "moral life" of the citizen, and of "progress" if you will, that is not, at least Cavell thinks, catered to by Rawls' abstract and rule-oriented approach to ethics and politics. Consequently, says Cavell:

I recognize the society and its government, so constituted, as mine; which means that I am answerable not merely to it, but for it. So far, then, as I recognize myself to be exercising my responsibility for it, my obedience to it is obedience to my own laws; citizenship in that case is the same as my autonomy; the polis is the field within which I

work out my personal identity and it is the creation of (political) *freedom*. [Cavell 99: 23]

In short, in view of the potentially transgressive (or progressive) character of what Cavell understands by community, Rawls' rule-oriented account of society is too *schematic*, just like Kripke's rule-oriented account of language is too schematic, underplaying the importance of voice, imagination and attunement, in short, the role of the individual self. Or, in the most extreme formulation, if one accepts Rawls' solution the horizon of society closes in a "false reconciliation", one that is imposed from outside rather than spontaneously worked out from within. Hence to Cavell, in his most radical appropriation of Emerson's radicalism, there really are only two options for society: Either it is (a) petrified in false reconciliation, or (b) it undergoes *constant crisis* where everything is open to questioning and discussion all the time.

Skepticism and perfectionism

Aversion versus avoidance;

eschatological connections

This radical posture, one should note, also reveals Cavell's deeper interest in skepticism. Namely, in order for the radicalness of Cavell's vision to assert itself with "no holds barred" the skeptical temptation to "look beyond immanence" must, as a side-effect, be allowed to return again and again. It is thus to Cavell far from unproblematic to be "converted" (detached) from skepticism once and for all, immersing oneself totally in the immanently coherent world-whole of current forms of life, with all its compromises and false reconciliations.¹⁹ Because if *that* happened, if such existential closure was attained once and for all, we would risk losing contact with the openness that holds out the vision of an "unattained" self and an "eventual" everyday. Thus in contrast to "bourgeois" liberalism and rationalism, as Cavell suggests in 'Philosophy and the Arrogation of Voice', he sees his own modernist vision of "ordinary" life as

¹⁹ This kind of dilemma seems to be behind the notion of what Eldridge calls Augustine's "misbegotten" conversion. Namely, Eldridge holds that the moment Augustine takes his conversion as attained in the Confessions, it loses its pathos (or drama), and therefore, its interest. Writes Eldridge:

...it is not clear that a full conversion to continence and charity is either possible or desirable. The very life of a person seems to disappear, once it is imagined as no longer inflected by temptation and unruly desire. This is reflected in the tendency of the protagonist of the Confessions to disappear as a presence after the conversion in Book VIII and a short denouement in Book X ... Perhaps it is not possible to lead a human life in full faithfulness as Augustine conceives of it, and if it is not possible, then perhaps it is neither desirable nor necessary in order to achieve full humanity and live one's ordained place in nature. [Eldridge 97: 129]

...containing a dimension or perspective of what I came to call Emersonian Perfectionism, one shared by Nietzsche and Thoreau. It is a perspective from which – given that there are choices we must make between what is right and wrong to do and what is good and bad to get – the given *world* is to be judged in which just these options and objects with which the world is conversant make the world in which, and in terms of which, to choose [Cavell 96a: 50, my italic]

Hence moral perfectionism has in common with skepticism that it takes it upon itself to judge the world radically, that is, as a “whole”. It is only in this perspective, according to Cavell, that one can think of there being a radically different world, one in which one could have a radically different *worldly self*.²⁰ Thus while Cavell sticks to the immanent plane, he retains the notion of a radical transformation of that plane. Accordingly, beyond this worldly horizon, on Cavell’s perfectionist view, there is not *another* world, just the present world transfigured, redeemed.²¹ This is indicative of how Cavell’s modernist fascination with the discourse of eschatology merges with that of moral perfectionism, and indeed, that of Marxism. For instance in *Cities of Words*, Cavell notes what he calls the “uncanniness of the fit between Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians and the end of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.”²² In other words the fit between—

Paul to the Corinthians (First letter) 15, 51-52:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

And Nora in answer to her husband Torvald Helmer in the *Doll’s House*:

Torvald: [...] What is this? Not gone to bed? Have you changed your things?

Nora (in everyday dress): Yes, Torvald, I have changed my things now.

Torvald: But what for?— so late as this.

Nora: I shall not sleep tonight.

Reflecting on this parallelism in the invocation of the notion of change or transformation (as well as that of sleep), Cavell writes in *Cities of Words*, 13; the chapter on Ibsen:

²⁰ Somewhat on the model of the resurrected body in Christianity, which presupposes a “new” creation, or the New Jerusalem.

²¹ Cf. Cavell’s remark on Nietzsche’s “Hinterweltlern” in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* [Cavell 90: 9].

²² Cavell: *Cities of Words*, 13 [Cavell 04: 262].

Some extreme statement is being suggested here about the secularization of modern life, about the relocating or transforming of what is important or interesting to human life, as if turning our attention from celestial to terrestrial things, or rather suggesting that their laws are not different. (This relocating of importance and interest is what in *The Claim of Reason*, following my reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, I call the recounting of importance, and assign as a guiding task of philosophy.) The specific turning of our concern with heaven back toward our lives on earth is something that preoccupied Marx... [Cavell 04: 262]

And then Cavell goes on to recall a passage from Marx's 'Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,' a passage that ends with the contention that the proletariat "can no longer lay claim to a historical status, but only to a human one... The complete loss of humanity... can only recover itself by a complete redemption of humanity."

The centrality of this anticipation of being "born again", shared in various ways by Christians, Marxists, psychoanalysts, romanticists, existentialists, etc., implies that to the modernist moral perfectionist *none* of the standards of judgment we operate with in ordinary life carry ultimate validity, including in politics. One can always think that things could be radically different. Like Nietzsche, we must at any point be ready for a transvaluation of all our standards of judgments. Thus the direction of "Emersonian" perfection is, as Cavell says in CH&UH,

...not up but on...in which the goal is decided not by anything picturable as the sun, by nothing beyond the way of the journey itself [Cavell 90: 10].

The course of this kind of modernist perfectionism is the endless journey of self-overcoming, attaining a further, next self, not "the" highest self, because "each state of the self is, so to speak, final" [Cavell 90: 3]. In such a "floating", ever-eschatological everyday – this eternal flux – the abiding risk of skeptical crisis becomes a natural feature. Or, put otherwise, the constant risk of skeptical crisis becomes a side-effect of Cavell's commitment to the radical *openness* of the utopian ideal of spontaneous agreement through perfect attunement. The upshot is that what Cavell calls the "avoidance" of the world and others inherent in skepticism is the flip side of the perfectionist "aversion" against a *compromised* everyday. That is, the "Emersonian" aversion against a society built on compromise (which *could* be interpreted as an aversion against society, period, which we shall discuss in Chapter 9), where "every word they

say chagrin us” because every word bespeaks the compromises of the speaker and his or her entire *world*. Namely:

If the world is disappointing and the world is malleable and hence we feel ourselves called upon for change, where does change begin, with the individual (with myself) or with the collection of those who make up my (social, political) world? ... I would say, indeed, that it is a principal object of Emerson's thinking to urge a reconsideration of the relation ... of soul and society, especially as regards the priority of one over the other [Cavell 04: 3].

Which means that on Cavell's reading the impulse to skepticism becomes parallel to the “Weltschmerz” that drives us to utopian visions, our notions of something *wholly other*. This is why, I maintain, that Cavell privileges the “truth” of skepticism as a point of entry to the human drama, as we otherwise know it from literature. Indeed, as Cavell affirms in the collection *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*:

My idea is that what in philosophy is known as skepticism (for example as in Descartes and Hume and Kant) is a relation to the world, and to others, and to myself, and to language, that is known to what you might call literature, or anyway responded to in literature, in uncounted other guises — in Shakespeare's tragic heroes, in Emerson's and Thoreau's “silent melancholy” and “quiet desperation,” in Wordsworth's perception of us as without “interest,” in Poe's “perverseness.” Why philosophy and literature do not know this about one another — and to that extent remain unknown to themselves — has been my theme it seems to me forever. [Cavell 94b: 154-55]

But does this mean that the moral perfectionist is a skeptic? No, but it means that he easily can mistake himself for one. Hence I am suggesting that on Cavell's view skepticism and perfectionism, in their radical evaluation of the world, are similar, but not identical. What is the distinction? The distinction, as I understand Cavell, is that

1. The skeptical questioner is aiming for the *certainty* of a *transcendent ground*.
2. The perfectionist questioner is aiming for the *reconciliation* effected by a utopian *reorganization of the immanent coherence of the world*.

Therefore we could say that:

3. While the skeptic is in a sense looking for *another* world, the perfectionist is merely looking for a *different* world.

Accordingly the perfectionist, as opposed to the skeptic, is not looking for something “behind” this world; he is merely looking to how *this* world could be radically *transformed*. Which means that the perfectionist is not trying to get *beyond* immanence, as such; he is merely trying to imagine how immanence could be organized differently, so that the denizens of the world, large and small, could be better *attuned* to each other. Yet, to repeat, these perspectives, and their motivations, are so close that they can easily be confounded, to the extent that the perfectionist could easily fall into skepticism, and – by the same token – that the skeptic could one day become a perfectionist. Therefore the skeptic’s disappointment with the present world could, when properly understood and acknowledged, be put to a perfectionist use.

It is in this sense that Cavell interprets, as we suggested already in Chapter 1, the impulse to skepticism in a “redemptive” manner. He attempts to disclose its “esoteric” utopian potential, implicit in its confused yearning for reconciliation in a *perfect whole*, which leads to a constant desire for a transgression of the compromises of the “given” world, hence in principle a *transformation* of the immanent whole we are familiar with, which is regarded as “malleable”. Thus, as I understand Cavell, one cannot dismiss the *possibility* of skepticism altogether without also dismissing its implicit utopianism, which would entail dismissing perfectionism as a *radical* project. True, one may become a “solid citizen” in the immanently coherent whole of the “actual” world, but one has sold out one’s capacity for *transformative thinking*, the ability to conceive (pace Marcuse) a world fundamentally different from what it is today (yet *also* fundamentally alike, in the sense that it remains immanent.) It is with these connections in mind we should evaluate Cavell’s treatment in *Cities of Words* of what he sees as the foreshadowing of “Emersonian” perfectionism in the work of Plato:

With respect to the characterization of perfectionism, *The Republic* is not only the most extended and systematic treatment, or portrait, among the great philosophers of the perfectionist perception of the moral life – a perception of it as moving from a sense of and state of imprisonment to the liberation of oneself by the transforming effect of philosophy – it also consistently portrays philosophy’s address to that process as directed not to the assessment of individual acts as right or wrong, good or bad, but to the evaluation of the worthiness of ways of life, an earmark of the perfectionist ambition. [Cavell 04: 37]

Accordingly, in Cavell's radical "politics of interpretation", a politics that could variously be called modernist, perfectionist, romanticist, utopian and redemptive, mere "therapeutic" detachment from skepticism becomes too "simple". Consequently there *is*, I maintain, a fundamental tension between more affirmative Wittgensteinian precepts of "therapy" (inevitably implying a "return" to the *compromises* of the "ordinary" ordinary) and the constant drama of transgression that is inherent in Cavell's philosophical modernism. Namely, there is in Cavell an unresolved tension between the need for compromises – as well as formal principles – that is to be reckoned with in any *actual* ordinary, especially the actual polis, and the uncompromising, but also in a sense uncommitted, ideal of spontaneous agreement in judgment that is inherent in Emersonian moral perfectionism, recognizing no other principle than spontaneity itself.²³ The latter is always pointing (like Bloch's "red arrows") ahead to an *eventual* ordinary, undermining the satisfactions – but also commitments – we have attained through substantial engagement in the *actual* ordinary.

The subject of style revisited

My rather compressed narrative hopefully goes some way towards explaining why Cavell is so much more drawn to staging and restaging the potentially "liberating" skeptical crisis (where we are poised on the brink of a perfectionist insight) than he is to working on a therapeutic resolution of the crisis which lands us squarely in the compromises of the "actual" ordinary. Correspondingly, if we in closing return to the subject of *style*, this is also the reason why the comparatively simple *way* (stylistically speaking) my initial "reconstruction" of Cavell was written is suspect. Indeed, that Cavell anticipates a problem with the rendering of his reflections as an argumentative ("analytical") whole is made clear in the contention that:

What I have written, and I suppose the *way* I have written, grows from a sense that philosophy is in one of its periodic crises of method, heightened by a worry I am sure is not mine alone, that method dictates to content; that, for example, an intellectual commitment to analytical philosophy trains concern away from the wider, traditional problems of human culture which may have brought one to philosophy in the first place. [Cavell 94: 74, my italic]

Accordingly, the very way I have attempted to connect the "dots" of Cavell's comments on language, and the way in which I have attempted to piece together the "fragments" of a

²³ This will be the issue of Chapter 9, in relation to Cavell's reading of the *Republic*.

“philosophy of the ordinary” offered in his texts, may be constitutionally incapable of revealing what he is ultimately getting at. And that is because such a “straight” (read: academic, bourgeois) treatment misses out on the *drama* of the problematic. It is this need for a dramatic “precedent” to carry his essentially *transgressive* line of thought, I will argue, that leads Cavell to philosophize through the constant *crisis* that he finds to be inherent in modernist art and aesthetics. Along these lines we will try to understand what J. M. Bernstein describes in ‘Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature: Cavell’s Transformations of Philosophy’ as Cavell’s “claims of virtual identity between philosophical and aesthetic forms of claiming, between the position of modern philosophy and artistic modernism”. [Eldridge 03: 107]

Chapter 6

Remembrance of things past: The significance of modernist art and aesthetics to Cavell's project

In the previous chapter we explored the notion of the world as an “immanently coherent whole”, and we saw how Cavell tried to fit the individual self into this whole through a perfectionist ideal of situated autonomy based on the utopian notion of spontaneous agreement in judgment. If we examine this notion a little bit, we realize that the objects and persons the “I” encounter in the world *also* appear as singular, specific entities, and not just as a schematic “thing in general” or “person in general”. A thing manifests its substantial thinghood in community with the substantial thinghood of other things, which indicates that every such thing must be able to maintain a complex configuration of likenesses *and* differences vis-a-vis every other. That is, a singular thing cannot maintain its substantiality on its own, merely surrounded by the abstract outlines of other things; this would ruin the *continuity* of the world as an immanent whole. Correspondingly, judgment, as far as it allows us (as individual selves) to orient ourselves within the immanent coherence of substantial things, is not only a matter of deciding how two entities are *similar* to each other; we must also be able to judge about the qualities of a *single* entity, as an immanently coherent whole unto itself. This is why we cannot rely entirely on a general “schematism” for judgment, because this schematism, to the extent it is general, inherently picks out what two entities have in common rather than what characterizes each of them as particular entities.

Yet this recognition, as we saw, leaves us with a dilemma if we are interested in *systematically* describing how we act and think and talk in the world. Namely, when we retract what we could call the “compromises” inherent in the application of a conceptual scheme to a domain of particulars, we at the same time give up the concomitant resources for *reconstructing* language and judgment, and thus of giving a “positive” account of our orientation in the world, exhibiting its conditions of possibility formally. But, might someone inveigh, if we are not dealing with the reconstruction, logical or psychological, of schemes and structures, what is left for philosophy to occupy itself with? Is not the reconstruction of schemes and structures, in one way or another, what philosophy *does*? Is this not what, since Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, has afforded philosophy the status of the “science of sciences”, uncovering the formal presuppositions of every other science, or for that matter, every other human endeavor?

On this note, going back to the early work (and the climate of Anglo-Saxon philosophy in the 50’s and 60’s), we retrospectively get an inkling of Cavell’s underlying motivation for implicating essentially Kantian *aesthetics* in a discussion of Wittgensteinian philosophy of language. Part of the answer, as we have just indicated, seems to reside in the lack of satisfactory alternatives; one could say that Cavell arrives at the aesthetical model through a process of elimination. Namely, in ‘Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy’ (*Must We Mean What We Say?*) Cavell examines two prevalent models for judgment in ordinary language philosophy: empirical psychology and formal logic, dismissing both. The way I understand the argument of ‘Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy’, Cavell is trying to position the Kantian conception of aesthetical assessment in between (or beyond) psychology and logic, in order to bring forward a new model of judgment, one that can shed light on our elusive “attunement” to the world and each other. Namely, Cavell suggests that there is an analogy between the judgments of aesthetics and of ordinary language philosophy in that they, in various respects, seem to resemble both logic and psychology, while neither, on closer inspection, is really subsumable under these categories. Psychology comes out as too “subjective”, and logic too “objective”, to cover what we are trying to say both in aesthetics and ordinary language philosophy. Therefore, as Cavell writes about Kantian-style aesthetical judgment in ‘Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy’:

I should admit that I call it “logic” mostly because it so obviously isn’t “psychology” ... I do not really think it is either of those activities, in the sense we attach to them now; but I cannot describe to anyone’s satisfaction *what* it is. [Cavell 94: 93]

Thus aesthetics and ordinary language philosophy are not necessarily the same, but at least they share the ambivalent relationship vis-à-vis logic and psychology. This ambivalence towards the compromises of “positive” solutions to the question of human intelligibility fits well with our analysis in the previous chapter. Indeed, having discussed various ways of making sense of Cavell’s “philosophy of ordinary language”, we came to the conclusion that Cavell *is* (in part for moral perfectionist reasons) ready to abandon the traditional “reconstructive” approaches to our intellectual and linguistic capacities. To wit, we suggested that he was ready to instead use *art* and *aesthetics* as an alternative “precedent” in terms of which to philosophize about our worldly being as finite intelligences, a precedent that was better able to capture its inherent *drama*. This we also found to make more sense in terms of Cavell’s peculiar philosophical style, indicating it to be not merely a contingent ornament (irritating or charming as personal preference would have it), but an integral part of his project.

Consequently, in the following we will examine two points of interest regarding Cavell’s engagement with modernist art and aesthetics, and the complications attaching to their confluence:

- (1) The significance of judgments of taste, as discussed in Kant’s third Critique, as a model for judgments passed by individual selves, qua individuals, upon a world of *sensuous particulars*.
- (2) The significance of art and aesthetics, in and after Clement Greenberg’s appropriation of Kant, as models for *transgressive* judgment.

The conjunction of (1) and (2) will be shown to ultimately lead to a dilemma, since the constant need for “dramatic” transgression in modernist art and aesthetics tends to encroach on the conditions that are necessary for the tranquil “dwelling” on sensuous particulars in appreciation of their beauty. This will subsequently be understood as indicative of the dilemma at the heart of Cavell’s philosophy: His notion of harmonious “attunement” to a world of sensuous particulars is encroached upon by his modernist privileging of the thought-figure of constant *crisis*, or, in a secularized, moral perfectionist sense, the semi-eschatological simile of life as continuous “baptism”. Which is to say that on my view Cavell, in a high-modernist gesture, in effect *renounces* some of the possibilities of overcoming skepticism held out by “Kantian” aesthetical experience, in favor of the pursuit of the “shock of the new” (putting the fate of art,

and of human intelligibility, at stake with every work), implicitly courting skeptical crisis again and again. This drives Cavell to the cultivation of a *motif* of infinitely deferred reconciliation that is more closely related to certain romanticist notions of the “tragic” than it is to the appreciation of beauty in Kant’s sense, a development we shall examine in Chapter 7. But let us begin with the beginning.

The “thing” revisited

Aesthetical judgment and the world of sensuous particulars

In his third critique Kant suggestively remarks that “there neither is nor can be a science of the Beautiful, and the judgement of taste is not determinable by means of principles ... There is therefore for beautiful art only a manner (*modus*), not a method of teaching (*methodus*).” (§60) A central feature of Kant’s third critique which makes it a natural resource for Cavell’s non-rule oriented approach to “agreement in judgment” is thus that it can be read as a modification of the first critique’s one-sided reliance on the notion of a formal “schematism”. That is, while the first critique in its idea of nature relies on a rigid, rule-bound conceptual scheme (derived from the categories), the third critique in its notion of nature is concerned with how natural phenomena must be judged in accord with more specific concepts than those of materiality, causality, etc., which, regarded in isolation, tends towards a strictly mechanical description of the world.

That is, the problem of judgment leads Kant, in the second part of the third critique, to the regulative (yet in his eyes transcendental) principle of *teleology* as a necessary guide to reflective judgment. What is crucial to our account is that, precipitating this move, we find in the *first* part of the third critique the elaboration of a form of judgment that does not rely on teleology (*vis-à-vis* concepts) but on the notion of a purposiveness *without* a purpose (or “lawfulness without law”), and the peculiar pleasure the subject derives from reflecting upon it. As Kant stresses (§9) regarding this kind of judgment, which is aesthetical: “The cognitive powers, which are involved by this representation, are here in free play, because no definite concept limits them to a particular rule of cognition.” It is not a rule, but the link between the subject’s pleasure and the object’s lawfulness without a law – i.e. with what one could call its individual immanent coherence *as it appears to the judger* – that makes the claim of aesthetic

assessment take on the character of intersubjective *judgment*, rather than personal preference.

Therefore, Kant writes in the Introduction:

... one who feels pleasure in simple reflection on the form of an object, without having any concept in mind, rightly lays claim to the agreement of every one, although this judgement is empirical and a singular judgement. For the ground of this pleasure is found in the universal, though subjective, condition of reflective judgements, namely the final harmony of an object (be it a product of nature or of art) with the mutual relation of the faculties of cognition (imagination and understanding), which are requisite for every empirical cognition. [Kant 52: 32]

I propose that what Kant here calls “the final harmony of an object ... with the mutual relation of the faculties of cognition” can be aligned with what Cavell calls our *attunement* – which, as we saw, he uses as just another word for “harmony” – to the world and each other. I.e. the way I understand this passage, (a) something is deemed beautiful in virtue of our response to its, in some conceptually ineluctable sense, formal coherence with itself, and that (b) the sensuous appeal of this individual self-coherence to our subjectivity, can be interpreted as indicative of our intersubjective attunement to the environment. Hence we could say that aesthetical experience, on this account, is about our attunement to the world and others as such. It does not deal with conceptual knowledge, but about how we respond to the individual traits of particular objects *in their peculiar immanent coherence*. As Cavell says: “It is essential 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?” [Cavell 94: 93] Or in J. M. Bernstein’s words, aesthetics as a field concerns

... the sensible conditions of knowledge and meaning, which is to say, sensuous or material meaning, the sensuous element of perceptual claims, and the perceptual element of objective cognitions, the subjective but not private conditions for objective knowing, what can be known only in sensing. [Eldridge 03: 111]

Hence, to reiterate, read on what I understand to be Cavellian lines, the third critique *is* about attunement. In other words, while the first critique concerns the schematization of physical objects in complete generality, the third critique concerns the cognition of *particular* objects. And in order to understand what is involved in that, apart from any conceptual scheme that can actually be *exhibited*, we must go by the way of aesthetical judgment. In somewhat more vivid language: The first critique treats of entirely *faceless* objects, constructed by rule-like operations, while the third critique treats of the individual faces or *physiognomies* of objects.

Correspondingly, aesthetical judgment, to use Kant's phrase from the critique, "fix our attention on the object itself". [§14] In elaboration of this perspective, consider his full phrasing of this point:

All form of objects of sense ... is either figure or play. In the latter case it is either play of figures (in space: mimic and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time) ... To say that the purity alike of colours and of tones, or their variety and contrast, seem to contribute to beauty, is by no means to imply that, because in themselves agreeable, they therefore yield an addition to the delight in the form and one on a par with it. The real meaning rather is that they make this form more clearly, definitely, and completely intuitable, and besides stimulate the representation by their charm, as they excite and sustain the attention directed to *the object itself*. [Kant 52: 68, italic mine]

Thus while in Kant's architectonic aesthetical judgment on its own is not afforded a truth-cognitive function, it is invested with tremendous *exemplary* significance regarding our harmony with, or attunement to, the world – and to each other. In short, it figures our human *community* in the world. Meaning that while Kant carefully keeps aesthetical and empirical judgment epistemically apart, they are still intimately linked at the level of regulative ideals, informing our notion of what we have called "agreement in judgment" as something carrying an element of "spontaneity". I.e. agreement in aesthetical judgment is regarded as paradigmatically spontaneous because it in principle issues from every single judger *separately*, as a singular self, yet in *unison* with all the others, and without the imposition of any rule or conceptual scheme.

For our discussion, what is crucial to note is that in Cavell's work, not the least in the early phase exemplified by 'Aesthetic problems of modern philosophy', aesthetic judgment is invested with similar significance, especially as it pertains to *art*. As in Kant, it seems that aesthetical judgment serves as an emblem for our shared experience of the sensuous comprehensibility of the world as such, i.e. *as* a world, that is, as an immanently coherent whole. Therefore, as Bernstein writes in 'Cavell's Transformations of Philosophy': "Following the lessons of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Cavell approaches [the problems of ordinary language philosophy] sideways, namely, through an exposition of the peculiar logic possessed by evaluative judgements concerning works of art." [Eldridge 03: 112]

I will not go into an extended study of the third critique, but I will recall Kant's four "moments" of aesthetic judgment. (I.e. for the sake of simplicity we will mostly confine ourselves to the Analytic of the Beautiful.) These four moments I take, following Cavell in 'Aesthetical problems of modern philosophy', to provide an important clue to our sense of attunement to the world and others. Or, following what I take to be the essence of J. H. Zammito's argument, in the third critique aesthetic judgment is emblematic of the precarious, but fine-grained harmony with human cognition that makes the world amenable to rational judgment *at all*. [Zammito 92] So, let us dwell for a moment on the Analytic's four moments under the headings (1) Disinterestedness, (2) Universality, (3) Necessity, and (4) Purposiveness without a purpose:

First: Moment (2) and (3) state that aesthetic assessment, despite its reliance on subjective feeling, possesses the universality and necessity that lends it the force of judgment. In effect these moments are characterizing aesthetic judgment as intersubjective. Second: In singling out aesthetically relevant form as "purposive without purpose" (or "lawful without a law"), and judgments of taste as "disinterested," moments (4) and (1) indicate that aesthetic judgment is *indexed* to a sensuous particular as apprehended by a particular person respecting that indexicality. Which means that one refrains from bringing external considerations to bear, and concentrate on the particular as such, i.e. the particular as what I have characterized as an immanently coherent whole *unto itself*. A beautiful "form" would then be an inner organization (composition) of an object that strikes us as particularly *satisfactory* as Kant says, on a purely aesthetic level. Therefore, to quote Kant's examples of beauty in §16, natural and artistic:

Flowers are free beauties of nature ... Many birds (the parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise), and a number of crustacea, are self-subsisting beauties which are not appurtenant to any object defined with respect to its end, but please freely and on their own account. So designs *a la grecque*, foliage for framework or on wall-papers, etc., have no intrinsic meaning; they ... are free beauties. We may also rank in the same class what in music are called fantasias (without a theme), and, indeed, all music that is not set to words. [Kant 52: 72]

Accordingly, since the aesthetically relevant form does not pertain to the *causal relations* of one object to another, the pleasure of the beautiful "is in no way practical, neither like that arising from the pathological ground of pleasantness, nor that from the intellectual ground of the represented good." [§12] Nor is it theoretical. This also implies that, as we encounter it in judgments of taste, "form" is realized in a manner that precludes it from being reductively

abstracted, i.e. exhausted by a scheme that focuses on merely *generic* features of the object. Hence the perspective of Kantian taste – i.e. of aesthetics – on the world militates against portraying it as an essentially homogenous “space” we can navigate according to a rule-bound conceptual scheme (which is the basically Cartesian vision of the physical world that is reproduced in the schematism of the first Critique.) This animus against abstract-formal reductionism in the third critique is made out clearly by Kant’s remark in §22 that

Now geometrically regular figures, a circle, a square, a cube, and the like, are commonly brought forward by critics of taste as the most simple and unquestionable examples of beauty. And yet the very reason why they are called regular, is because the only way of representing them is by looking on them as mere presentations of a determinate concept by which the figure has its rule (according to which alone it is possible) prescribed for it. One or other of these two views must, therefore, be wrong: either the verdict of the critics that attributes beauty to such figures, or else our own, which makes finality apart from any concept necessary for beauty. [Kant 52: 86]

Consequently, in contrast to Classicist aestheticians who sought general *laws* for beauty, particularly in formulas of proportion, Kant maintains that for something to be beautiful, it must not be merely geometrically *perfect*. There is no “formula” for beauty, says Kant in §17:

It is only throwing away labour to look for a principle of taste that affords a universal criterion of the beautiful by definite concepts; because what is sought is a thing impossible and inherently contradictory. [Kant 52: 75]

In contrast, Kant indicates that the apprehension of beauty demands protracted *attention* to a sensuous particular; that is, we “dwell” on it. As Kant writes in §12:

We *dwell* on the contemplation of the beautiful because this contemplation strengthens and reproduces itself. The case is analogous (but analogous only) to the way we linger on a charm in the representation of an object which keeps arresting the attention, the mind all the while remaining passive. [Kant 52: 64]

Aesthetical judgment demands concentrated attention to a certain object *in* the world, rather than attention to a scheme *of* the world. Hence, in order to appreciate that an animal is beautiful, it is not enough to be told that it has a generic feature, say the shape of a lion. (Proceeding from the general principle that lions are beautiful.) You need to see a specific lion in order to appreciate the beauty of *its* particular form (qua aesthetical form and not qua

biological species.) “The result to be extracted from the foregoing analysis is in effect this”, as Kant summarizes in §22:

...that everything runs up into the concept of taste as a critical faculty by which an object is estimated in reference to the *free conformity to law* of the imagination ... And although in the apprehension of a given object of sense it is tied down to a definite form of this object and, to that extent, does not enjoy free play (as it does in poetry), still it is easy to conceive that the object may supply ready-made to the imagination just such a form of the arrangement of the manifold as the imagination, if it were left to itself, would freely project in harmony with the general *conformity to law of the understanding*. [Kant 52: 85]

Hence the focus of the Analytic is on a “free” order or play (*Spiel*) that the human subject is capable of producing and responding to, even in unison with others, yet is unable to reduce to a conceptual scheme. That is, in our terminology, the Analytic treats of a type of order that appears to us in our fine-grained “attunement” to the world, an attunement that cannot be reconstructed and exhibited on a schematic basis. And, just for the reason that this attunement (and this order) cannot be so exhibited, it is easy to overlook in a *systematic* account of our cognitive powers, simply because it does not easily fit into the formal “categories” of a system. That is, from the point of view of the *system*, it would be much easier to just *forget* about the individual physiognomies of the world, and concentrate on the general traits that things have in common, such as that they *all* have extension, that they *all* occupy a region of space, etc. Hence the function of aesthetics and aesthetical experience could, in a Cavellian perspective, be regarded as being to remind us of certain aspects of our worldly existence that we might tend to overlook or be blind to in more abstract modes of thought.

Sleeping beauty

Aesthetical experience and the kingdom of the world

What is crucial to our narrative is that the particularity of aesthetical form, and thus the autonomy of aesthetical judgment, could be seen as something that has been forgotten, or obscured, or “bracketed” by certain “pictures” (in the Wittgensteinian sense) of schematic form and generative rules. In other words: The aesthetical perspective is indicative of something that has been lost in the compromises of our “rationalized” relation to the world, and concomitantly, its recollection serves as a basis for a strategy of *recovery* of the world *as* world (i.e. as a whole consisting of individual “things”.) It is this strategy of recovery that for Cavell could serve as

an alternative to a doctrinal refutation of skepticism. Hence the function of the Analytic, if we see it in a Cavellian perspective (as distinct from Kant's own), is not necessarily to create a *theory* of aesthetic judgment. It could rather be understood as a therapeutic attempt to recall, return to or recover certain aspects of the world and of our own selves, aspects that are, in principle, right before us. This is at the same time a recovery of the "commonness" – both in the sense of ordinariness and of sharedness – of our world, our commonwealth.

This is compatible, although not identical, with Kant's conclusion that the only strategy that can do justice to the judgment of taste is the *presupposition* of a common sense of aesthetical form (which he stresses must not be confused with a common sense of the Understanding.) Thus Kant writes in §20 that judgment of taste must have a "subjective principle" which determines what pleases or displeases by feeling yet with universal validity [Kant 52: 85]. Recognizing the obscurity of such a notion Kant is not presenting the third critique as offering a self-contained proof against skepticism, but rather portrays it as an elaboration of the transcendental deduction in the first critique. The upshot is that Kant asserts in §21 that some kind of common sense or attunement is a

...necessary condition of the universal communicability of our knowledge, which is presupposed in every logic and every principle of knowledge that is not one of scepticism. [Kant 52: 84]

If we leave to one side the Kantian technicalities here, and concentrate on how we can understand this notion in Cavellian terms, we might say that we do not *have* to "prove" the validity of judgments of taste: We merely need to be *reminded* of what they are and what they concern, what is at stake, our "real need" hinted at by the pleasure afforded us by the world when we open ourselves to aesthetical experience. (Or the pleasure forgone when we blind ourselves to it.) And the "mode", rather than the "method", of that reminder is to teach us to look again, to linger (call it dwell²⁴) by the things in the world and to "listen" to our own power of aesthetical judgment, which is, on my account, simply part of our attunement to the world. We must open ourselves to the "free play" of forms in the world in order to give the world a chance to convince us that it is "real" (in the sense we understood it in the previous chapter, namely forming a coherent and engaging immanent whole) and not merely a "posit" of our conceptual schemes. In short, to use Kant's expression we must learn to "dwell" on things, and not only to categorize them. This, one might surmise, using a Schillerian turn of phrase, would

²⁴ Cp. the use of the notion of dwelling in 'Building Dwelling Thinking' [Heidegger 01].

be part on an “aesthetical education”; not an education *in* aesthetics, but an education *by* aesthetics.

What this means is that on Cavellian terms (leaving out the transcendental deduction) the *Critique of Judgment* cannot complete its “argument” on formal grounds, not even in conjunction with the first two Critiques. It is not cognitively self-contained, does not provide its own ground. Being readable as a work of *instruction* (as Cavell says of the PU) rather than proof it can only, directing our gaze, prompt us to look at the world for ourselves, taking it in as an immanently coherent whole, consisting of individual entities, “sensuous particulars”, which (at least aesthetically speaking) form immanently coherent wholes, or *worlds*, of their own. We could say that on this vision the function of aesthetical contemplation, as well as of its philosophical elaboration in “aesthetics”, is to *wake the sleeping beauty of the world*. But this means that we must rouse the sleeping capacity within our own *selves* for appreciating that beauty, and this is where the necessity of a “critique” (understood, I stress, in a Cavellian way) comes in. The element of “critique”, one might say, borrowing Kant’s phrase, is what wakes us up from our “dogmatic slumber”. Indeed, as Thoreau said of his own work, he wrote in order to “wake my neighbors up”. Thus, if we are to follow Cavell and Thoreau, it is not enough to merely peruse an aesthetical “argument” or “theory”; we need to go out there and trace the forms of things with our own eyes and our own hands – and to talk and write about it, asking others not to take our words for it, but to go look (or touch or listen or taste or smell) for themselves.

Hence, in this manner also reading and writing, paradigmatically poetry, becomes a way of unbracketing the world of sensuous particulars from our self-imposed compromises and schematic constraints, and by the same token, to free ourselves from our self-imposed exile, re-entering the kingdom of the world. The joyous feeling, however brief, of aesthetical experience is part and parcel of that. As Wordsworth wrote:

O what a joy it were, in vigorous health
To have a body...
And to the world surrender it
As if it were a spirit...²⁵

Or as Thoreau wrote of his dwelling in the forest of Walden:

²⁵ *The Excursion*, Book IV.

My residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world, whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time on to linen paper... [Thoreau 04: 99]

Thus in a Cavellian perspective it is not hard to conceive how the third critique, when read as an instruction to look at the world afresh, free of artifice and prejudice, fed into romanticist, post-Kantian thought. Indeed, as Zammito writes, “Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* of 1790 marked a watershed ... a conduit through which the most important ideas and ideals of the German eighteenth century passed to the generation of Idealism and Romanticism.” [Zammito 92: 1] This resonates with Cavell’s understanding, in CH&UH and in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, of romanticism as an attempted “recovery” of the world from skepticism’s unhandsome “clutches” (categories), an understanding that extends to the New England Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. Writes Cavell of Thoreau:

Epistemologically, [his] motive is the recovery of the object...a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object. [Cavell 92: 95]

Of course, this is not necessarily in keeping with Kant’s understanding of his own project in the third critique, which did not directly cast doubt on the critique of pure reason and thus not on the radical unknowableness of the “thing in itself”. Yet the critique of judgment could still be read, by anyone already so inclined, as an encouragement to do just that. Indeed, the post-Kantian romantic-idealist tradition, deeply informed by art and aesthetics, which originates with the reception of the third critique, flows directly into some of the radical, not to say transgressive (seeking to break down the rationalist boundaries) philosophy of the *twentieth* century as well. As J. M. Bernstein summarizes a central tenet of this tradition:

Hibernating within aesthetic discourse is another discourse, another metaphysics, the very one we apparently need in order to cognize and transform the one we routinely inhabit. Thus the refuge that aesthetics represents for this alternative conception of community and mode of cognition simultaneously entraps it, a trap that remains until its aesthetic confinement is brought to an end. In Heidegger, Derrida and Adorno the attempt is made to undo the block, release what art and aesthetic discourse signify from the spell that encloses them within the illusory world of art. [Bernstein 97: 9]

In this perspective, as far as I understand the implicit Cavellian appropriation of Kant's notion of beauty, the critique of aesthetical judgment prompts us to make the things *ours* again (and we theirs, surrendering to them), to "recover" (unbracket, un-schematize) the world and the words that uncover it to us, in order to overcome our skeptical alienation or *exile* from it. This unbracketing of the world implies to recover our own *selves*, to make the self whole, heal its inner division. In short: To make the self free; free not in opposition to the world but free as part of it, free *in* the world (making it our kingdom), which corresponds to what I in the previous chapter called the notion of situated autonomy. That, at least, is the utopian vision, the regulative ideal governing the Cavellian-Emersonian vision of the redemption of the world and the self *together*, that is, in perfect attunement to each other.

Indeed, Cavell's favorite example of such an attempted "recovery" of words, world and self, is what Thoreau, the American Romantic, did in Walden – Walden the location (where he dwelled) and *Walden* the book. To wit, Cavell portrays in *Senses of Walden* Thoreau's mission to go into the woods in order to live and write as an essay in overcoming a "sense of distance from self, or division of self" [Cavell 92: 107]. However, in relation to what we have been sketching out above there is a quirk in Cavell's line of thought that we should note. Namely, though Cavell's reading of *Walden* apparently sits well with the way he seems to understand Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in his early writings, Cavell in the *Senses of Walden* insists on discussing Thoreau's project in terms of the *first* critique, writing that

I am convinced that Thoreau had the Kantian idea right, that the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental (or we may say, grammatical or phenomenological) preparation; that we know just what meets the a priori conditions of our knowing anything überhaupt. These a priori conditions are necessities of human nature; and the search for them is something I think Thoreau's obsession with necessity is meant to declare. His difference from Kant on this point is that these a priori conditions are not themselves knowable a priori, but are to be discovered experimentally [Cavell 92: 95]

In view of what we have said above, this seems a bit harsh on Kant; the third critique appears considerably more sensitive than the first to the elusive harmony with nature that Thoreau is seeking in the forests of Concord. Indeed, by accepting the elusiveness of our more fine-grained attunement to the world, Kant has already recognized that some aspects of it must perhaps be "discovered experimentally." As Kant notes in §22:

This indeterminate norm of a common sense is, as a matter of fact, presupposed by us; as is shown by our presuming to lay down judgements of taste. But does such a common sense in fact exist as a constitutive principle of the possibility of experience, or is it formed for us as a regulative principle by a still higher principle of reason, that for higher ends first seeks to beget in us a common sense? ... These are questions which as yet we are neither willing nor in a position to investigate. For the present we have only to resolve the faculty of taste into its elements, and to unite these ultimately in the idea of a common sense. [Kant 52: 85]

Thus Kant settles, for the purposes of the *Analytic*, for the task to “resolve the faculty of taste into its elements in order to unite them at last in the Idea of a common sense”, and this is what results in its four “moments.” The rest, one might say, is largely up to experience. Not empirical experience in the sense of a scientific investigation, but the experience of experiencing as such, as a pleasure unto itself.

Beauty, taste and exemplarity

The scene of instruction, yet again

The above considerations leave us with an extremely important point. Since it is so difficult to say much about aesthetical judgment on *a priori* grounds, what remains beyond a general analysis of “moments” is the so to speak *application* of these moments in each and every instance of aesthetic judgment, as these judgments gradually constitute a historical *practice*. Indeed, an aesthetical practice which, when viewed in relation to artistic production, is intrinsically linked to the reception of those works in judgments of taste, a judgment for which there *are no rules*. We will come closer to a proper appreciation of the importance of these notions to Cavell’s project as we consider how they are reflected in Kant and Cavell’s conceptions of art and art-criticism, and how this carries over to Cavell’s understanding of attunement and agreement in judgment.

“One could, I suspect,” writes J. M. Bernstein in ‘Cavell’s Transformations of Philosophy,’ “recover a good deal of what is most structurally challenging in Cavell’s thought through the logic of exemplarity.” [Eldridge 03: 115] The “logic” of exemplarity Bernstein is referring to here is exactly the one that can be linked to passages from the third critique. Indeed, as Bernstein points out, Cavell’s notion of one individual speaking exemplarily (arrogating his or

her voice) for a whole community of language-users can be read in close conjunction with passages like §18, where it is said that aesthetical “necessity”

...is not a theoretical objective necessity - such as would let us cognize a priori that every one *will feel* this delight in the object that is called beautiful by me ... Rather, being such a necessity as is thought in an aesthetic judgement, it can only be termed *exemplary*. [Kant 52: 81]

Put another way, what forces the “logic” of exemplariness in aesthetics is the irreducibility of beautiful objects to a formula or scheme. The aesthetical object which embodies beauty, the exemplar, must be substantial rather than conceptual, individual rather than general; this is fully in accord with our contention that aesthetical form, due to its indexicality in relation to an immanently coherent whole, cannot be separated from the object that is so formed, not even in thought. As an aside, Kant launches into a consideration of how *man* can be construed as an “ideal” of beauty. But this notion is connected with the doctrine, expounded in the Dialectic of the Beautiful, of beauty as “symbolic” of morality. Not wishing to go into this aspect since it is hardly central to Cavell’s appropriation of the Analytic’s notion of judgment, we shall depart from this point of Kant’s exposition, and instead concentrate on how there is a complementarity between his concepts of “universality” and “necessity”, or, in Cavell’s terminology, between *exemplariness* and *instruction*. Let us remind ourselves how Cavell describes what he calls the “scene of instruction”. Cavell writes in CH&UH:

I conceive that the good teacher will not say, ‘This is simply what I do’ as a threat to discontinue his or her instruction, as if to say: ‘I am right; do it my way or leave my sight.’ The teacher’s expression of inclination in what is to be said shows readiness – (unconditional) willingness – to continue presenting himself as an example, as the representative of the community into which the child is being, let me say, invited and initiated. [Cavell 90: 72]

Thus an act or object that is to establish itself as exemplary, must in a sense turn out to have the same gentle power to instruct as the “good teacher”. It must *guide* an interlocutor in a certain way – not forcibly, but in a way the interlocutor can assent to in his or her own “voice”. This also goes, in the third critique, for the one that is trying to instruct a pupil regarding how to proceed artistically. Namely, as Kant writes in §60:

The master must illustrate what the pupil is to achieve and how achievement is to be attained, and the proper function of the universal rules to which he ultimately reduces his treatment is rather that of

supplying a convenient text for recalling its chief moments to the pupil's mind, than of prescribing them to him. [Kant 52: 226]

This emphasis, for the purposes of aesthetical instruction, on recalling the aesthetical experience itself in regard to specific exemplars brings us back to the notion of the beautiful object's peculiar formal self-coherence, its lawfulness without law. When we are stipulating a connection between exemplarity and instruction, we are demanding that the aesthetical judge, in order to justify his judgment, should be able to instruct us in a manner that makes us aware of a compelling *connection* between (1) the object's particular formal self-coherence, as it appears to us, and (2) a peculiar *pleasure* in the experience of the object. So while we may not be able to say what beauty *is*, generically, we should still be able to convey something about why we find *this* particular object beautiful, even if only by gestures. As Kant puts it, somewhat paradoxically in §18, "it is a necessity of the assent of *all* to a judgement regarded as exemplifying a universal rule incapable of formulation." [Kant 52: 81]

Playing it by ear

Sense, sensibility and OLP

In consequence of the above stress on concrete aesthetical demonstration, we recognize that in order to preserve the *aesthetically relevant* form of a work of art, say one of Wordsworth's poems, you have to preserve the actual poem – you cannot preserve the aesthetical form of the poem apart from the poem itself. Because in that case, with the object present only in abstract outline, one would not have a concrete exemplar available for aesthetical demonstration. We need the *fine grain* in order to respond properly to the work, and that fine grain is to be found in the work itself. On this note, returning to OLP and its relation to aesthetical judgment, we should appreciate that Wittgenstein writes in PU part II that, "It is possible to say a *great deal* about a fine aesthetic difference. – The first thing you may say, of course, may be just: 'This word fits, *that* doesn't' – or something of the kind. But then you can discuss all the extensive ramifications of the tie-up effected by each of the words." [Wittgenstein 58: 219] Thus the way to justify our aesthetical judgment on some poems (say of Wordsworth's) is to exhibit them, the poems themselves, preferably in what Wittgenstein would have called a "perspicuous" manner, which means to "discuss" in a wide, performative sense including gesturing and imitating, and thus "reliving" or "re-creating" aspects of the work, the "ramifications of the tie-up effected by each of the words."

A neat illustration of what this means is provided by Jeffrey Wainwright in his book on the basics of poetry. He writes about Wordsworth's poem 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud':

Transcribing her husband's most famous poem, Mary Huthcinson Wordsworth picked up her pen one day and wrote '*I wandered like a lonely ...*' At this point she stopped and realized her mistake. In this small difference between

I wandered like a lonely cloud

and

I wandered lonely as a cloud

We hear the essential importance of rhythm to poetry. In these two versions the sentiment expressed is the same, the image used to convey it is the same, the number of syllables and even the placing of the beats is the same. Nonetheless, and not only because of familiarity, '*I wandered like a lonely ...*' sounds wrong. Analytically, the reason must be that *like*, though a vital part of speech, is to weak a word to bear a stress at this point in the impetus of the line. Putting it there delays the important idea of loneliness, especially as associated with the *I*, whereas the stresses placed in '*I **wandered lonely ...***' enable the line to gather its meaning into the long and important syllable *lone*- so that the line pivots upon it in both rhythm and meaning. But '*I wandered like a lonely cloud*' simply sags in the mouth. [Wainwright 04: 56]

I venture that convictions about the importance of the ineffable "tie-up effected by each of the words" of say a poem, prompting apparent necessities, i.e. intuitive differentiations between "right" and "wrong" expressions, what fits and fits not, constitutes a mainstay of Cavell's career, figuring for him our fine-grained sensitivity to words, which he, much like Kant, takes to be profoundly indicative of our attunement to the world and each other. This notion is again illustrated by the PU, as Wittgenstein continues the passage quoted above:

The word is on the tip of my tongue." What is going on in my consciousness? That is not the point at all ... – "The word is on the tip of my tongue" tells you: the word which belongs here has escaped me, but I hope to find it soon. [Wittgenstein 58: 219]

This effect of words – of seeming to belong or not belong with each other, prompting a response from us – can be compared to the aesthetic effect of sounds, how some of them appear, to the person possessing the appropriate pitch, to go "well" (say harmoniously) together

and others not. Cavell offers a memorable example of this phenomenon in his ‘Philosophy and the Arrogation of Voice,’²⁶ referring to his musical training under Bloch. Cavell recalls Bloch vividly illustrating the power of music during a class in composition at Berkeley:

[Bloch] would play something simple, at the piano, for instance a Bach four-part chorale, with one note altered by a half step from Bach’s rendering; then he would play the Bach unaltered. Perhaps he would turn to us, fix us with a stare, then turn back to the piano and repeat, as if for himself, the two versions ... “You hear that? You hear the difference?” ... “My version is perfectly correct; but the Bach, the Bach is perfect; late sunlight burning the edges of a cloud. Of course I do not say that you must hear this. Not at all. No. But.” ... “If you do not hear it, do not say to yourself that you are a musician. There are many honourable trades. Shoe-making for example.” [Cavell 96a: 49]

Bloch is here drawing attention to the extreme subtlety of musical form, how the experience of its “meaning” depends on having the right kind of “ear”. It is an example that seems to have left an indelible mark on Cavell’s mind in regard to how one is to understand intelligibility as such, and a fortiori, the ordinary language philosopher’s attempts to speak exemplarily about the nuances of meaning in everyday language. Indeed, Bloch’s performance of Bach, as well as Wainwright’s reading of Wordsworth, illustrates what I take to be Cavell’s notions about the role of the *critic* as one that has mastered (educated) a sense of form (subjective as that sense may be) in an exemplary way, and a fortiori, the affinity of the roles of the critic and the ordinary language philosopher. Namely, it ultimately comes down to pointing out what others are to look for or listen for. The corresponding similarity between musical pitch and an “ear” for ordinary language philosophy is explored in Cavell’s autobiographical account ‘A Pitch of Philosophy’:

My mother had something called perfect pitch, as did one of her brothers I felt there must be something I was meant to do that required an equivalent of the enigmatic faculty of perfect pitch. Being good at following and producing Austinian examples will strike me as some attestation of this prophecy. [Cavell 96a: 21]

Indeed, we could think of the practice of ordinary language philosophy as an exercise not only in linguistic pitch, but in *conceptual* pitch. In this sense we might say that discussions in OLP typically are about whether one concept (theme) “modulates” into (1) a variation of itself, or into (2) another concept (theme) altogether. I.e. whether something is a species of mistake, or if

²⁶ From the collection *A Pitch of Philosophy*.

it is to be considered as something else, say an “accident.” And like in musical or literary criticism, we may argue that such transitions are, say, too strong or too abrupt, asking for intermediate transitions to be interposed, developing differentiations within differentiations.

This parallelism with musical pitch, so suggestive of “attunement”, throws some light on Cavell’s argument in ‘Austin at Criticism.’ Here Cavell suggested that the ordinary language philosopher in his or her evaluation of what is the “right” words in a certain context (“what we say when”) can be likened to that of an art critic, the analogy being that the art critic is also concerned with judging about the “right” employment of various expressive elements. This accounts for the ‘criticism’ in ‘Austin at Criticism.’ As Cavell remarks:

The positive purpose in Austin’s [grammatical] distinctions resembles the art critic’s purpose in comparing and distinguishing works of art, namely, that in this crosslight the capacities and salience of an individual object in question are brought to attention and focus. [Cavell 94: 103]

Correspondingly, in ordinary language philosophy we ask ourselves “what we say when” on the basis of comparison with various contexts of utterance, in view of which we evaluate if a suggested projection of a word seems “fitting.” Since these comparisons (between “mistakes” and “accidents”, etc.) must be made on the basis of informal judgment, i.e. a non-schematic understanding of our forms of life as such (i.e. as forms of *life*), there are no “apodictic” criteria – in the sense of Malcolm – that invest our “grammatical investigations” with certainty. Thus what OLP does presuppose in its practitioner is not a very specific talent (like music does), but rather certain powers of observation and articulation, a high level of education and sensitivity to words and actions, in short, a talent for making and criticizing *discriminations*. And surely, such sensitivity to linguistic nuances, not unrelated to the appreciation of the “poetic” qualities of language – such an educated eye and ear for words and situations – is abundantly illustrated in the work of Austin. Cavell relates the importance of Austin’s facility in these matters, and its affinity to possession of an “ear” for something:

It was familiarly said that the point of Austin’s stories, those examples apart from which ordinary language philosophy has no method, required what you might call “ear” to comprehend (as in, more or less at random, setting out the difference between doing something by mistake or by accident, or between doing something willingly or voluntarily, carelessly or heedlessly, or between doing something in

saying something or by saying something, or between telling a bird by its call or from its call). [Cavell 96a: 21]

To use one's "ear" for linguistic nuances in this Austinian manner, to speak exemplarily of "what we say when", is what Cavell calls the "arrogation" of voice in ordinary language philosophy, which he takes to be similar to the arrogation of voice implicit in aesthetical judgment. The person that arrogates his or her voice does not speak as a private individual, but as a *public* individual – one language-user among others, and in a certain respect, one just like any other. Indicating that the practitioner of ordinary language stakes his or her authority on no *special* power; his or her authority rests on a difference in degree, rather than in kind, vis-à-vis the power of judgment of the average person. Indeed, the authority of the ordinary language philosopher depends on his or her being "just" a human being, i.e. a member of a human community of intelligibility, the community on behalf of which he or she speaks.

By the same token, every time the ordinary language philosopher arrogates his or her voice, there occurs a "drama" or "crisis", the resolution of which hangs in the balance indefinitely and cannot be resolved by simply appealing to some predetermined scheme or rule. And the crux is that this "dramatic" situation, this "moment of truth", as I understand Cavell, is what is also inherent in the production of modernist *art*, where every work figures a crisis of intelligibility, or "arthood", as such. In the words of J. M. Bernstein: "A modernist work of art is one that can claim validity or authenticity for itself if and only if its claim ... to validity is at the same time the lodging of and sanctioning of a claim as to what art is." [Eldridge 03: 117] What this implies is, as Bernstein says, that in Cavell's conception there is an identification of "the logical form of modern philosophy ... with the logical form of modernist works". [Eldridge 03: 107]

To wit, this is the identification that I see as really raising the stakes of Cavell's "philosophical modernism", and which aligns it with the messianic, uncompromising attitudes of "Emersonian" moral perfectionism, perhaps to an impossibly high degree. But to elucidate this we must take a closer look at some moments Cavell regards as characteristic of aesthetical, indeed modern, works of art.

Work, intention and materiality

In order to understand what characterizes the Cavellian view of the work of art, we must take stock of the Kantian convergence of art, aesthetics and *nature*, where nature is understood not as what inspires “naturalism”, but as the paradigm of the inseparableness of form and “content” that fine arts aspire to. Kant famously declared in the third critique that “Fine art is an art, so far as it has at the same time the appearance of being nature” (§45). This in a way summarizes not only Kant’s, but as I see it, Cavell’s philosophy of the artwork, at least the aesthetical artwork. Namely, if we use the vocabulary employed above, we could say that the aesthetical work of art is *indexed* to its materiality in a way that makes it reminiscent of, though not identical, with nature. For something to be called an aesthetical work of art in this sense, it must preserve the integrity of its material conditions, and yet transform those conditions into a human expression. In Cavell’s terminology from *The World Viewed*, the aesthetical art-work forms a “world” unto itself. That is the

...world of a painting is not continuous with the world of its frame; at its frame, a world finds its limits. We might say: A painting *is* a world.
[Cavell 79: 24]

This I take to mean that the aesthetical art-work has a peculiar formal self-coherence, a coherence that is “free” in the sense that it is neither exhausted by concepts nor by schematic constructions. In short, it must have a certain quality of free self-articulation which sets it apart – makes it stand out – from its environment: That is, renders it an immanently coherent whole unto itself. This rather vague definition is exactly what makes it impossible to determine what an artwork is in the absence of actual works and actual judges of those works. Consequently, in keeping with the third moment of the *Analytic*, the “free” or “expressive” or “world-like” quality of the artwork, as Cavell underscores in his early writings on aesthetics, is not secured by the formulation of a literal, or literary,²⁷ *intention* (a purpose); it is more a question of articulation-for-the-sake-of-articulation-as-such, or an “intentionless intentioning,” which is: Purposefulness without a purpose, lawfulness without a law. That is, according to Cavell in ‘Music Discomposed’

A work of art does not express some particular intention (as statements do), nor achieve particular goals (the way technological skill and moral action do), but, one may say, celebrates the fact that men can intend

²⁷ To recall terms from Michael Fried’s ‘Art and Objecthood.’

their lives at all ... that their actions are coherent and effective at all ..
This is what I understand Kant to have seen when he said of works of
art that they embody ‘purposiveness without a purpose.’ [Cavell 94:
198]

Which implies that while the artwork must not be so conceptually abstract as to compromise the integrity of its materiality, it must neither be so concrete (literal) as to lose its work-character. Indeed, in the first case the concept would dominate over the material, in the second case the materiality would dominate over the expression. Hence what Cavell is stressing is that the artwork reflects on human expressivity *in* materiality, and that neither of those dimensions can be dispensed with – we cannot have pure expression, which would be a mere concept, nor pure materiality, which would be a mere (literal) thing. It is in the inextricable, and inexplicable, fusion of materiality and meaning that the artwork gains its peculiar world-like, or one might say, nature-like integrity. It is this which gives it its “free” formal self-coherence, its playfulness or character of “*Spiel*”.

A crucial feature of this world-like quality is that the work when completed ceases, as it were, to be the expression of the artist, and instead assumes the appearance of being the expression of *itself*. This fits with Kant’s requirements in §45: On the one hand, we affirm that we must be conscious of art as art (expression), yet the artwork must in a sense look like, or have the appearance of, nature (retain its material integrity or indexicality.) This implies, in Cavellian terms, that in the work of art, the artist acknowledges the integrity of his or her materials, yet takes full responsibility for the result as his or her *work*, something that was “intended” or composed to be the way it is, though it does not “mean” something specific. Hence the completed work, as a “world” unto itself, becomes independent of its creator. This notion of the work’s freedom and independence implies that the work must have been produced in a manner that transcends mere rule-following – since in the opposite case the work would be bound by, and reducible to, those rules. Being dominated by rules, it would neither have formal freedom nor substantial independence: it would not, in short, have a quality of *spontaneity*.

Hence we could say that to Cavell aesthetical art is about creating a work without unduly dominating the materials. Consequently, to Cavell artistic creation figures the responsibility that we all carry for our expressions, even when they, in the public realm, become independent of us. That is, it figures how we ideally should use words without dominating them, i.e. without smothering them under our private interpretations, accepting that the words to a certain extent

“speak for themselves.” Thus even as our words and works become detached from our private interpretations of them – and subject to the interpretation of others – we must continue to recognize them as *ours*. Hence, as Bernstein puts it in ‘Cavell’s Transformations of Philosophy’, invoking the work of Pollock as exemplary:

Pollock showed how one might, under the most extreme conditions of [acknowledging the materiality and independence of the artwork] nonetheless take full or absolute responsibility for one’s doings, how in the midst of pours, tube-squeezed ropes, splatters and flecks and spills one might still compose a work that was emphatically and unavoidably one’s own. [Eldridge 03: 121]

Consequently the modernist aesthetical artwork, as Pollock demonstrates, is not a rule-bound construction. Nor does it “use up” its materials in order to replace them with an “intention”, but rather spontaneously accommodates the “intentionless intentioning” of the artist within the conditions the medium, which is what makes the work emerge as if a “world” unto itself, i.e. in the Kantian sense, as if it was “nature.”

In this perspective we might say that to the extent that art in this strictly aesthetical sense is “about” anything, it is about establishing reciprocity between materiality and expression, or more generally, community between Man and World, as well as reciprocity among the audience (the community of judges), which is another way of saying that art, in its pure aesthetical form, is “about” our attunement to the world and each other. In the fact that a work of art can become public, i.e. emerge as independent of its creator, and still remain his or her responsibility, there is acknowledged an intimate reciprocity between subject and object, and among subjects. Thanks to its material integrity *as* expression the artwork is not a mere extension or exteriorization of the artist’s will, which would have been in accord with a crudely expressionist view of art. Indeed, on a crudely expressionist view artistic creation might be conceived to *be* about the domination of the artist’s will over the materials, the projection of his intention on the world, to celebrate this dominion. The more the will dominates the better, which leads to the vision of the artist (the “genius”) as a kind of despot and the material as his slave. On Cavell’s view however, one should ask what the *artwork* means, rather than what the artist meant by the artwork. The artist does *not* despotically impose his or her will on the materials, but rather *cooperates* with them. In this perspective the artwork is what emerges from such intimate interaction between the artist and the medium. Indeed, it is that cooperative

aspect which makes the aesthetical artwork such a powerful figuration of a worldly being which is not based on domination, and thus a figuration of the idea of reconciliation as such.

This indicates why we do not “use” an artwork in the same way as we “use” a tool. The artwork, say a sculpture, is not a “pragmatic” object – *it* is, in contrast to say a hammer, explicitly about our attunement to the world, which the hammer only presupposes implicitly. That is, the hammer is functional, the sculpture is “expressive.” Expressive not of the artist’s will, but of the reciprocity of man and world, materiality and meaning. Thus as we have indicated, the sculpture’s expression is not independent of its materiality; rather the material is part of that expression. The expression *participates* in the material.

To summarize: As I understand Cavell, we can understand aesthetic art as objects transformed into expression (an immanently coherent “world”) without compromising or dominating their materiality. This is what distinguishes the artwork, (1) from the *tool*, where the generic function (concept) of the object dominates over its material particularity, and (2) distinguishes the artwork from the *mere thing*, which is untransformed by human agency. I.e. artworks are objects transformed by human agency, but, as Kant stresses in §45, this transformation must not be a “*laboured effect*” [Kant 52: 167], which we can take as an admonition that a certain kind of violence should not be done to the material in the process of making it art. Equivalently: The artwork is material things transformed into expression without rupturing the *indexicality* of form vis-à-vis materiality, which means that the work is not produced by the projection of an alienated scheme upon the material, but by the elaboration of an individual form in terms of the spontaneous tendencies of the material itself.

“The shock of the new”
From genius to the avant-garde
Modernism, transgression and the
cultivation of crisis

The above discussion has traded on the connection between the conception of a purely *aesthetical* art, and the conception of a *modernist* art, where the “free” expression of the complementarity of materiality and meaning assumes center stage. (Implicitly displacing naive notions of “realism” as the gold-standard of modern art.) And so far, I find Cavell to provide us

with the opportunity for highly plausible reflections about the connection between ordinary language, aesthetical judgment, the creation and appreciation of artworks, and our mutual attunement to the world under the ideal of spontaneous agreement in judgment. However, at present we move into more problematic terrain. That is, we shall see how Cavell's alignment of his discussion of art with the tenets of "high modernism" begins to reap radical consequences. Namely, roughly on the lines of Clement Greenberg, Cavell tends to conflate Kantian aesthetics with an aesthetics of *transgression*, where every work of art has to be *radically new* in order to count as art at all. What happens then, on my view, is that the traditional aesthetical qualities of the artwork recedes into the background in favor of its "sublime" qualities of transgression, what has been called the "shock of the new", and the concomitant *drama* of reception. And the problem with that, I maintain, is that this constant crisis tends to undermine our sense of attunement to the world and each other, that is, undermine the very sense of harmonious agreement that the peaceful contemplation of beauty was meant to *enhance*. Which implies that in the larger picture there arises a profound tension in Cavell's work between the tenets of "high modernism", craving perpetual revolution, and those of ordinary language philosophy, which counts on the incremental, almost glacial, evolution of the "natural history" of language.

How does this dilemma come about? I will argue that it comes about through a gradual process of radicalization, where the contemplative and one could even say *affirmative* spirit of Kantian aesthetics is left behind bit by bit. And just because of this, because they occur by hook and by crook, the processes involved are all the more inexorable, finally leaving modernist art on the brink of *exhaustion*.

To take it from the start: According to Kant, beautiful art is the art of *genius*; which in the modernist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg translates into the notion that modernist art is the art of the *avant-garde*. In both cases the reference is to someone who breaks or goes beyond the rules. Genius, as Kant writes in §46, is

...a *talent* for producing that for which no definite rule can be given, and not an aptitude in the way of cleverness for what can be learned according to some rule; and that consequently *originality* must be its primary property. [Kant 52: 168]

This draws attention to the perspective on art that has to do with the process of production. Until now we have spoken of the “work” of art as an artifact. Conversely, we can look at art not from the viewpoint of the finished work, but from the perspective of the process of the artist’s “working.” Now, the requirement, discussed in the previous section, that the artwork should constitute an articulative transformation of the material, translates into a temperation of the transgressive nature of what Kant calls “genius” by relating it to the quality of *skill*. Genius we can then still understand as the capacity for invention, i.e. *originality*; yet this ability, Kant stresses, must be tempered by technical skill in working with a certain range of techniques. The technique and skill counterbalancing the originality of genius can, in Greenbergian terms, be understood as the mastery of a certain artistic “medium” (say painting.) This medium-specificity is what insures a worldly “friction” in the work of art, and hinders that materiality dissipates into pure expression, or pure concept. Accordingly, as Kant writes in §47, “Despite the marked difference that distinguishes mechanical art, as an art merely depending upon industry and learning, from fine art, as that of genius, there is still no fine art in which something mechanical ... does not constitute the essential condition of the art.” [Kant 52: 171] In other words, genius is not exemplary in abstracto, but becomes exemplary when it manifests itself in concrete works through the harnessing of genius by skill and taste.

Thus the Kantian conception of the exemplarity of works of genius *as* works (not as mere ideas) is initially given a modernist formulation in the thought of Clement Greenberg. As Greenberg asserts, displaying the same concern as Kant that, in the unavoidable absence of categorical determinations of “authenticity” (i.e. of rules) in art, art should degenerate into a totally arbitrary product, into pure chance, in short, that art should forego *any* standards of justification.²⁸ To forestall the total loss of a measure of legitimacy, Greenberg argues that the practice of art must own up to its dependence on, however convoluted, some kind of inner continuity, an inner continuity constituted by the succession of exemplary *works*. This, claims Greenberg, is especially true of *avant-garde* art, the type of art that apparently most challenges historical continuity, even profiles itself as anti-traditional. Yet for all that avant-garde bluster art is “continuity”, Greenberg writes in ‘Modernist Painting’, concluding that

Without the past of art, and without the need and compulsion to maintain past standards of excellence, such a thing as Modernist art would be impossible. [Harrison 03: 779]

²⁸ Compare Cavell’s criticism of the use of chance in music in ‘Music Discomposed.’ [Cavell 94]

Prompted by the modernist crisis (“what is art?”), recognizing that the questions of art cannot be determined outside art, Greenberg settled for an idea of *immanent criticism*. Hence the question of what art is must be explored immanently to the various art-forms and their attendant critical discourses. Greenberg connects this line of thought explicitly to the general Kantian project of a critical philosophy, indeed, as he says in ‘Modernist Painting’, “I identify modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of the self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant.” And he elaborates:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left in all the more secure possession of what remained to it. [Harrison 03: 774]

Cavell takes up Greenberg’s notion of immanent criticism and, like their mutual associate Michael Fried, orients it increasingly toward questions of media as such.²⁹ This can be seen as an attempt, on behalf of Fried and Cavell, to intensify reflection on what makes an artwork an *art-work*. In other words, in my terms Cavell and Fried are looking more closely into what constitutes the *indexicality* of the work, both when it comes to materiality and to historicity. Cavell’s solution is to emphasize how the artistic medium becomes a medium in virtue of an exploration of the expressive resources of certain materials, materials that can now be chosen rather freely. As Cavell writes in ‘A Matter of Meaning it’, materials like “wood or stone would not be a medium of sculpture *in the absence of the art of sculpture*.” [Cavell 94: 221] For example, as Cavell writes about Anthony Caro’s work in ‘A Matter of Meaning It’, he had always assumed

...that a piece of sculpture was something *worked* (carved, chipped, polished, etc.); but Caro uses steel rods and beams and sheets which he does not work (e.g. bend or twist) but rather, one could say *places*. I had thought that a piece of sculpture had the coherence of a material object, that it was what I wish to call spatially closed or spatially continuous (or consisted of a group of objects of such coherence), but a Caro may be open and discontinuous... [Cavell 94: 217]

...and so on, showing how Caro challenges and redefines our assumptions of what sculpture *is* through the immanent criticism inherent in the exemplary creating of radically new sculptures.

²⁹ Compare Michael Fried: ‘Art and Objecthood.’ [Fried 98]

In this conception of “invention” or “discovery” of a medium the historical “drama” of exemplary performances is brought to the fore. In the “crisis” of a would-be exemplary work a new direction in art is initiated – or *fails to be*. Hence, for instance painting *as* a medium has been constituted through a series of crises leading up to our own times, paint and canvas having ceased to be “mere things”, now being handed down to us *performed* as expressive (artistic) materials.

But this means that we have moved the focus from the creation of novel *works* (which is what is at stake in Kant, who considers the art-forms themselves to be relatively stable), to the creation, at an ever increasing pace, of novel *media*. Namely, the artistic medium, writes Cavell in ‘A Matter of Meaning it’, is not given at the outset, but must be

...discovered, or invented out of itself. [Cavell 94: 221]

This notion of the medium being “invented” out of “itself” through the inspired agency of the artist is the ultimate outcome of the Kantian stress on “originality”, or if you want, spontaneity. It indicates that the artistic process *is* essentially originary, an act of creation.³⁰ Hence, on the most extreme view, the various media have in a sense been created “ex nihilo.” But once one realizes that this is a possible way of looking at artistic production, there is no reason that not any number of new media should be created from “out of nothing”, simply by the godlike act of creation itself. By the same token *each and every artistic effort* has the possibility of creating not only “odd” works³¹ but also “odd” media, media that if they are “successful”, if they convince, are able to change the direction of the tradition (redefine the media as such), thus altering what people would be prepared to call “art” in a *radical* way. (At this point urinals might be regarded as an artistic medium.) The reception of such works/media would then assume the form of scenes of ever more extreme crisis (that is, as we approach the climactic point before exhaustion takes its toll) where we are brought to look at art in a certain manner that convinces us that “now we can go on” – we have gotten the point of the new work, we “dig” it, leaving us with the inevitable question: What’s next?

³⁰ Cf. Heidegger’s notion of the “origin” of the work of art. [Heidegger 01]

³¹ For the notion of “oddness” in paradigmatic works, see H. Bloom: *The Western Canon*.

Aesthetical modernism, modernization and the crisis of intelligibility

This extreme conception of canonical exemplarity, comprising as it were a sharpened sense of “artistic revolutions” (one might almost say artistic catastrophes) is unavoidably formed within an awareness of history and historicity that had not quite established itself in Kant’s time. So, one might say in hindsight, what happens, which was not foreseen by Kant, is that “advanced” artistic production, orienting itself towards the “shock of the new”, more and more takes on a resemblance with advanced *capitalist* production. Namely, as more and more “new” media are invented, implicitly displacing the “old,” we have a situation where, in the realm of artistic significance, “everything solid melts into air”. I.e. we have a situation that is reminiscent of Marx’s contention in the *Manifesto* that in modernity:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind. [Kamenka 83: 207]

Hence, we could say that what Kant did not anticipate, but which Greenberg picked up on (first enthusiastically, then to his increasing suspicion), was the constant revolutionizing in the artistic “means of productions” in modernity. Now, one could ask: Is there a problem here? Is this restless creation of “new” media not just an updated version of the Kantian requirement of the autonomy of art?³² Yes, in a sense, but as J. M. Bernstein argues in *The Fate of Art*, the *meaning* of that autonomy in itself changes through history. Or perhaps better, the meaning of that autonomy gradually becomes *clear* through history. Because as art becomes ever more specialized and abstract it appeals less and less to the Kantian “common” aesthetical sense of the cultured citizen. Which means that the Kantian “autonomy” of art turns more and more into an “alienation” of art, figuring not (as it still largely does in Kant) the “ordinary” way we are attuned to each other and the world, but some special, “esoteric”, avant-garde way of living

³² A positive analysis to this effect is set forward by Thierry deDuve in *Kant after Duchamp*. Essentially, his argument is that the replacement of the question “is this beautiful” with the question “is this art” is a legitimate continuation of the Kantian aesthetic tradition. In contrast, I argue below that it can be seen to strain that tradition – even in its Greenbergian incarnation – to its breaking point.

one's life, divorced from the concerns of "normal" people. Indeed, Michael Fried contends that the ever-increasing autonomy of art

...means that while modernist painting has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of the society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure, and complexity of moral experience – that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness. [Fried 98: 219]

Correspondingly, art becomes increasingly perceived as something for unworldly souls, people who do not know what "real life" is about (chiefly the acceptance of *compromise*, which is the one thing that the modernist artist, like the moral perfectionist, is loath to assent to.) But this tendency towards isolation had been implicit in the idea of an art based solely on immanent criticism since its very inception by Clement Greenberg, a well-schooled Marxist who was not blind to the questionable sides of aesthetical modernism. Indeed, Greenberg was aware of the affinity between the modernization of art and the increasing division of labor, leading to the degradation of traditional forms of life (like of art) and *their* ways of making sense of human existence. Accordingly the convergence of the dilemmas of modern art and the dilemmas of the modern world is hinted at already in Greenberg's 'Kitsch and the Avant-Garde' from 1939. Namely, the development of autonomus art is not only seen (as is still conceivable in Kant) as a celebration of the human community of intelligibility; it is seen also as enacting the increasing cultural alienation in modern society. That is, according to Greenberg modernist art becomes emblematic of how

A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything. All the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works. [Harrison 03: 540]

Consequently, the crisis of modern art figures, however indirectly, the crisis of modern culture. That is, in Greenberg's and his followers' perception art has been historized in a way that was scarcely conceivable to Kant, art gaining an ever-more iconoclastic dynamic and self-understanding, with an accelerating stress put on the *transgressive* qualities of the work of art and its ability to establish itself not only as a unique work within a medium, but to redefine the

medium as such, ultimately to redefine *art*. This means that art (somewhat like Bourgeois society in late capitalism) has become constant *crisis*, a relentless series of revolutions in (to borrow the Marxist phrase) the “means of production”, i.e. a constant crisis in the very expressive powers of art. Thus the task of the artist, as modernity and modernism wears on, becomes ever more “ontologically” ambitious (or *serious* as Cavell calls it), posing the question of the “to be or not to be” of art at every juncture. In effect, the original Kantian question “is this beautiful” has been replaced by the ever more precarious question “is this art?”

The consequence of this is that we have reached a situation in high modernity, as Cavell notes in his early essay on Kierkegaard, where the artist has assumed the structural position of a “prophet.”³³ This could be expressed, notes Cavell

...by saying that while he may, as artists in former times have, begin and for a long time continue imitating the work of others, he knows that this is merely time-marking – if it is preparation, it is not artistic preparation – for he knows that there are no techniques at anyone’s disposal for saying what he has to say [Cavell 94: 177]

In short, authentic art takes on the character of *revelation*. Correspondingly, the stakes of art (artistic claiming) have been raised in a way that acerbates, to a point unimagined by Kant, the notion of a work of “genius”. According to Cavell, at the apex of modernity and modernism,

...we can no longer be sure that any artist is sincere—we haven’t convention or technique or appeal to go on any longer: *anyone* could fake it. And this means that modern art, if and where it exists, forces the issue of sincerity, depriving the artist and his audience of every measure except absolute attention to one’s experience and absolute honesty in expressing it. [Cavell 94: 211]

Thus the modernist work ultimately takes on the very form of crisis (indeed, something very close to a skeptical crisis), a crisis of *meaning* as such, akin to the crisis that Marx described with the words “all that is holy is profaned.” Correspondingly, if we pick up on Cavell’s simile of the prophet, the artist becomes someone who is shouting in the wilderness, his or her exhortations most likely falling on the proverbial “deaf ears”, the world so profaned that what it really needs is to be destroyed and created all anew, which is exactly what, on a symbolical level, the modernist work aspires to do.

³³ Cavell: ‘Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*.’ [Cavell 94]

The problem with the radicalizing of the Kantian aesthetics is thus, as I have suggested, and as Greenberg noted himself (for instance in his comments on “avant-gardism”), is that the modernist crisis of art, as a perpetual, self-confirming *drama*, in the end comes to dominate over the aesthetical *contemplation* of the work of art. This also means that the work’s integral *materiality*, which is what makes it fit for being the object of sensuous “dwelling” (to use Kant’s expression), as opposed to the vehicle for a mere idea, recedes into the background. This is a function of the historical fact that in high modernism, aesthetical experience becomes dominated by the “shock of the new”, which in turn indicates that the “sublime” act of transgression takes the place that was formerly held by the peaceful immersion in the beautiful.³⁴ A paradigm of this development, as noted by Greenberg, is the work of art that consists of nothing but an *empty canvas* stretched on a frame. The upshot, as J. M. Bernstein points out, is the thesis of the “end” of art, where it is suggested that art, in its relentless search for originality and autonomy, has *exhausted* its possibilities.³⁵

Bonjour tristesse

The exhaustion of modernist art as a figuration of the dilemma of philosophical modernism

This has been a long digression from our core issue, but on this note, let us recall Bernstein’s contention that Cavell claims “virtual identity between philosophical and aesthetic forms of claiming, between the position of modern philosophy and artistic modernism”. [Eldridge 03: 107] This diagnosis, if combined with the deeply alienated tenets of aesthetical modernism exposed in Bernstein’s *The Fate of Art*, leaves us with the following dilemma: If it is true as Cavell intimates, and as Bernstein argues that he actually *means*, that the fate of philosophy, and indeed, the fate of human intelligibility as such, is correlated with the “fate” of modernist art, does the “end” of art spell the “end” of philosophy and human intelligibility too? Or simply: Does the “end” of modernist art, its exhaustion in the empty canvas (intelligible as a work of art only to the highly trained specialist), also spell the “end” of the kind of exemplarity that OLP aspires to?

³⁴ For some ideas on how the focus in high modernism moves from the beautiful to the sublime, cf. Myskja’s monograph on the sublime in Kant and Becket. [Myskja 02]

³⁵ Cf. Bernstein: *The Fate of Art*. Cp. also the opening lines of Adorno’s *Aesthetical Theory*, where he suggest that what was initially thought of as the new-found freedom of art turned out to be in many ways a restriction.

Personally I think this dilemma essentially defines the situation Cavell is forced into, perhaps somewhat inadvertently, in virtue of his reliance on the high modernist appropriation of Kant (as opposed to relying on the *Critique of Judgment* itself). It is ironical, because it undermines his own rather promising attempts at making sense of OLP in terms of the example of judgments of taste, and more generally, of using aesthetical experience as a point of departure for elucidating the idea of our attunement to the world and each other, and thus the conditions of meaning of “ordinary” language. These efforts are cut short, and to a certain extent reversed, by the extreme radicalism he is saddled with through the precedents set by the aporias of high modernism (merging with the dilemmas generated by the uncompromising attitude of “Emersonian” moral perfectionism), compelling him to infinitely defer further investigation of such more “affirmative” issues. Thus, through the embrace of “high” modernism (as opposed to say the “Enlightened” modernism of Kant), there is struck a fundamental note of *negativity* in his work, which is connected with what I in Chapter 9 will call the “danger of self-imposed exile”.

Indeed, in the following we shall see how Cavell tries to come to terms with this problematic within the horizon of *tragedy*, which comprises both tragic drama and certain strains of romanticist poetry. In particular, we shall examine a specifically disenchanted mode of romanticism, as well as a specifically modern understanding of tragedy. The main idea here is that in modernity man has become so estranged from the “true” world that he is cut off even from the anticipation of reconciliation that is inherent in the Kantian contemplation of the beautiful, which means that art now can only mark this total alienation. Art turns away from a preoccupation with the “presentness” of the sensuous particular and concentrates instead on its *absence*. Hence we are in a sense faced with a “new” kind of tragedy: Not the ancient one that tells us that it is impossible for humans to be gods, that humans cannot be at home in the divine realm (and so must make do with the immanent continuity of their own); no, a modern tragedy that tells us that humans cannot really be *humans* any more, that humans are not at home even in the earthly realm, its immanent coherence having in a sense become empty, a “wasteland”. We are, to put it briefly, outcasts from the kingdom of intelligibility.

The result of Cavell’s engagement with high modernism (and its subversion of its Kantian origins) forces on us an analysis where it appears that *language* has lost all “solid” significance for us, and that every time we use a word we are in principle faced with a crisis of meaning. Every time we use a word we are implicitly faced with the question of why it should not mean

something completely different from we *think* it should mean. (Or what it, pace Kripke, meant yesterday.) We cannot rely on the “everyday” meaning of words any more because, under the relentless pressure of “progress” (the perpetual shock of the new), *nothing* is everyday, because nothing endures “every day”. Everything is “up in the air”, or in the process of melting into it, in an age of excessive freedom. Thus what ordinary language philosophy deals with is no longer a peaceful return of words to the ordinary, but the realization that no words *are* ordinary any more, because nothing is ordinary; everything is, if looked at in the right light, uncanny, *unheimlich*, not our home. On this analysis “ordinary” language, qua ordinary, de facto departs with the traditional forms of life supporting it, or rather, supporting the semblance or illusion (German: “*Schein*”) of it. Ordinary language belongs, so to speak, to the pre-modern world of mythology.

Hence we begin to see what saddles Cavell’s philosophical modernism with its fundamental dilemma. Namely, according to its lights the forms of life which ordinary language (or “agreement in judgment”) depends on can no longer be seen as *continuously meaningful*. Rather, to the extent authentic meaning is experienceable at all, it is in the briefest sublime flash, like it is with a work of high modernist art. In short, the meaning of words, as the gratifications of art, has become profoundly *unreliable*.

The consequence is that meaning as such, or the world as such, appears to consist of isolated instants precariously joined together; i.e. nothing is really ordinary because what we think of as ordinary is just a *perpetual exception*. As a prototype of this modernist particularism, inherited from certain eschatological traditions (involving theological occasionalism), we might consider a quote used by Michael Fried as an epithet to the essay ‘Art and Objecthood’:

Edwards’s journals frequently explored and tested a meditation he seldom allowed to reach print; if all the world were annihilated, he wrote ... and a new world were freshly created, though it were to exist in every particular in the same manner as this world, it would not be the same. Therefore, because there is continuity, which is time, “it is certain with me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed.” The abiding assurance is that “we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first.” [Fried 98: 148]

Implicitly, on this view the events of the world do not unfold according to the “natural” order of things, but through some incomprehensible miracle, some perpetual act of creation. And crucially (most crucially), post-Auschwitz this can hardly be regarded as a *benevolent* miracle, because it merely perpetuates the world in all its suffering and meaninglessness. Hence if this is a “proof of a God”, as is suggested in the quote above, it only goes to show why modern man is feeling estranged from divinity. Thus, as Gnosticism teaches, if *this* is the world the lord of creation made, then we are exiles in it; we do not belong here. This world cannot be the real Kingdom, and this god not the real divinity.³⁶

In conclusion, the very project of an ordinary language philosophy, when subordinated to the tenets of high modernism, becomes aporetic, as aporetic as selfhood, community and worldliness itself. This leads us to a new perspective on Cavell’s work: Namely, we can indeed see it as the enactment of a drama, but a more somber one than anything we might hitherto have contemplated; one that, in the perspective of the radical modernist, haunts us every instant of our lives: *The drama of exile*.

³⁶ Cf. [Critchley 04] for a similar exposition of the aporias of modernity, drawing on Becket and Adorno, among others, and partially (at least) Cavell. See also Heller’s *The Disinherited Mind*. [Heller 61].

Chapter 7

The kingdom lost:

Tragedy, homelessness and the crisis of intelligibility

That what I am is one who to exist enacts his existence is an answer Descartes might almost have given himself ... But for Descartes to have given such an answer would have threatened the first declared purpose of his Meditations, which was to offer proof of God's existence. If I am one who can enact my existence, God's role in the enactment is compromised. Descartes's word for what I call 'enacting' – or 'claiming' or 'staking' or 'acknowledging' – is 'authoring' ... Apparently it is the very sense of my need for a human proof of my human existence – some authentication – that is the source of the idea that I need an author.³⁷

The considerations of the previous chapter have brought some new moments into our reading of Cavell. One might even say that they have started to put the more radical and aporetic features of his philosophical modernism into sharper relief. Namely, we have seen that in Cavell's discussion of selfhood, community, reconciliation, etc., there is a movement from the fairly affirmative perspective indicated by Kant's third Critique, where our "everyday" attunement to the world and each other is more or less anticipated by (i.e. partially experienced in) our agreement in aesthetical judgment, to a more high modernist where our attunement to the world and each other becomes ever more attenuated as "everything solid melts into air" also on the level expression and symbolism.

That is, in the previous chapter we touched upon how, in the view of commentators such as Clement Greenberg and J. M. Bernstein, it is the "fate" of modernist art, in thrall to the "shock of the new", to become ever more *alienated* from the substantial concerns of human life.

³⁷ [Cavell 94b: 109]

Something that, in turn, can be read as high modernist art merely mirroring the alienation of modern life from itself. Thus, if we follow Bernstein's suggestion, which indeed seems to fit with Cavell's self-presentation, that to Cavell the "claiming" of his ordinary language philosophy is somehow intrinsically linked to the "claiming" of modernist art, then it seems to follow that it is language itself, as part of our unraveling forms of life, that undergoes a crisis. Namely, language (on this view) appears increasingly to be arbitrary, unable to express something really substantial about life. Which means that we are led, in terms of Cavell's own alignment of OLP and modernist aesthetics, to regard ordinary language in modernity as undergoing a perpetual *catastrophe*, where every second can be regarded as a struggle with *the problem of meaning as such*. To wit, it highlights how the crisis of language and the crisis of the self converge in modern thought. We find our self, so to speak, at a loss for words. And this perpetual crisis, *exhausting* the subject and its language or culture (figured in the exhaustion of modernist art in the blank canvas), can also be interpreted as a permanent *exile*, where we appear to have been placed in an "external" position vis-à-vis intelligibility, without being able to distinguish between sense and senselessness, what can be said "seriously" or not.

Thus metaphorically speaking, the perspective of high modernism indicates that the self has lost its "home" in language. Linguistic meaning, under these circumstances, is not something we can take for granted, but something that we can merely strive for, and perhaps figure in sublime foreshadowings of what could be called the "kingdom" of intelligibility, the worldly realm transformed into something that actually makes sense in terms of our deep need for belonging.³⁸ In this simile man becomes not the "king of creation", but like Lear a king in *exile*, struggling to make sense of his alienated existence through what Cavell in effect calls "prophecy". (Cf. the comments in the previous chapter on the modern artist as a prophet.)

Indeed, with this in mind I think we can say that Cavell implicitly holds a "tragic" view of human existence, but, as we shall, see "tragic" in a sense that resonates with themes from the romanticist tradition of tragedy rather than from the antique one. Specifically, in this particular sense, Cavell can be understood as reading Wittgenstein's *Investigations* not only as a "drama", but as a tragic drama, the tragic drama of exile or *homelessness*.

³⁸ I.e. I am using the word "kingdom" as a cipher for reconciliation. Cf. 'Motifs of Kingdom and Exile in Atala'; Joyce O. Lowrie, *The French Review*, Vol. 43, No. 5. (Apr., 1970), pp. 755-764.

The PU and tragic drama

As I have just suggested, the significance of the (romantically) “tragic” way of thinking for Cavell has been foreshadowed by the fact that he has located the PU in a certain hermeneutic context, namely the form of drama. By this I mean that while in the PU the “voices” of the dramatic antagonists represent a *struggle* between irreconcilable desires, the poetic-aphoristic evocation of release (such as in the image of the fly let out of the bottle) constitute a momentary liberation from that struggle, a “catharsis”. This give us a first inkling of how the characteristically Cavellian move of regarding the PU as a drama in effect puts Wittgenstein in the continuation of a whole Idealist-Romantic tradition capitalizing on the philosophical import of tragedy. That is, there is a tradition, as Beistegui and Sparks contend, “anchored in the German thought of the end of the eighteenth century, which takes tragedy—and particularly Greek tragedy—as its theme” [Beistegui 00: 1]. Indeed, we shall in the following see that Cavell’s philosophical modernism can be understood to reside largely in his implicit *appropriation* of this tradition through his dramatic reading of Wittgenstein. Namely, the composition of the PU, on this pattern of interpretation, becomes one which juxtaposes (a) a tragic struggle for absolute assurances, oscillating between dogmatism and skepticism, with (b) the cathartic release from that struggle in brief intervals of acknowledgement of one’s *fate* as a finite being, a liberating realization of one’s human limitations. But importantly, this in a sense brings us no longer than to a recognition of our exile; it does not lift the exile itself. I.e. it does not effect a de facto return to the ordinary.

Hence at the one hand we could say that what philosophical modernism, in Cavell’s sense, is doing *is* to articulate a modern version of the ancient Greek tragic insight: That man is a finite creature defined by a desperate yearning for reconciliation with something larger than itself, say with something “absolute”. Tragic drama then enacts, and momentarily releases, this yearning. However, the relevant “romantic” sense of tragedy is linked to a specifically *modern* view of life where, as Eldridge puts it, the self “is experienced as a difficulty or burden “ [Eldridge 97: 21] Thus in the words of Eldridge, comparing the PU with Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*: “It is to this kind of remembrance [of the limitations and possibilities of the human self] that [the] *Philosophical Investigations* ... enacting it, fitfully, calls us” [Eldridge 97: 288] And specifically, this remembrance of our finite powers is evoked, if we are to follow Cavell in ‘The *Investigations*’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself,’ by the satisfaction of finding the “right”

words in poetic aphorism (the right words for our sense of worldly selfhood), achieving a brief – and the brevity is of the essence here – moment of release from doubt and anxiety. Thus what the PU provides, on Cavell’s reading, are ephemeral moments of self-acknowledgement, offering us the satisfaction of having said (or read) something meaningful. That is, a brief satisfaction that we have found words to match the self, to bring the self out of unknownness, its confinement in the “theatre of the mind” momentarily lifted. Indeed, as Cavell remarks in ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’:

Here is a source of our gratitude to poetry. And this sense of unknownness is a competitor of the sense of childish fear as an explanation for our idea, and need, of God. [Cavell 94: 266]

Yet, as I have stressed, what we must constantly remind ourselves is that according to Cavell’s reading, Wittgenstein’s aphorisms only briefly *punctuates* the ongoing struggle between skeptical and dogmatic voices, bringing *momentary* release, like a flash of lightning. Due to the sublime brevity of this release, the tragic drama of the PU brings in a sense no *substantial* reconciliation, not even on a partial basis. It is merely an enactment of redemption, a cipher for it.

The (dis-) order of things

Distinctions of ancient and modern tragedy

In nuce, what makes me emphasize that the Cavellian, “romantic” version of tragic drama, foreshadowing high modernism, is distinct from the ancient one is that in the ancient version the reconciliation offered by catharsis *was* in a sense substantial (if partial). True, it had to be renewed regularly (for instance in annual festivals of tragic drama) but it was still seen as a real reconciliation with human fate, or more graphically, with the gods. Thus the reconciliatory efficacy of ancient tragic drama must be regarded on the background of the strong institutional support for the cult of tragedy (tied to the mytho-poetic cult of the polis) in ancient Greece. And in turn, this should be seen on the background of the tragic world-view being steeped in pre-modern convictions about natural order, about the basic continuity of the world, and of the community. This, not the least, as regards the Greeks’ cyclical view of time, where the generations, like the seasons, pass into and perpetuate each other, a process mirroring the divine revolutions of the heavenly bodies.

That the overall Greek cosmology, or sense of “Being”, should be taken into account when one thinks about ancient tragedy is a point that Gadamer calls attention to in *Truth and Method*. Because ancient tragic drama, says he,

...is not an experience of an adventure producing a temporary intoxication from which one reawakens to one’s true being; instead, the elevation and strong emotion that seize the spectator in fact deepen his continuity with himself. [Gadamer 01: 133]

It is in this spirit that Gadamer finds ancient tragic drama to be in a sense *affirmative*; it is not merely about exclusion and displacement, but about finding one’s rightful place in the mortal realm, which is simultaneously the polis and the cosmos. Hence on the ancient view tragic catharsis *did* in a sense reinsert the finite subject into the “kingdom” of the world, in continuity with himself and his community, and thus with the cosmos. In short, in ancient tragedy, writes Gadamer:

The spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate. [Gadamer 01: 132]

Thus ancient tragic drama, like ancient philosophy, can be regarded as a form of education for the free citizen of the polis; it facilitates the “care for one’s soul” by dramatizing the burden of assuming responsibility for one’s own judgment, while still acknowledging one’s inability to control that judgment from “the ground up”; a residual dependence on fate always remains, which in the end just means that one is continuous with the cosmos. In other words, ancient tragedy is the drama not of “pure” freedom (in the sense of the modern self, personal liberty and “free will”), but of freedom *in its intertwinement with fate*. The function of tragic drama is to help the finite self to *endure* its own freedom under that condition. We might say that ancient tragic drama warns us, or the citizen, (1) not to abuse freedom in order to avoid fate (seeking to become more than human, i.e. godlike), yet still (2) not to be so intimidated by fate as to cast away freedom (and become less than human, i.e. slavlike).

In summary, the ancient vision of tragedy, as I have indicated, presupposes a conviction that the world *is* our “kingdom”, our natural and rightful place, which essentially means that one has not divided the human world of the polis from the divine/natural world of the cosmos, but rather regard both as the expression of an all-pervading *logos*. That is, such a view presupposes something like the Greek confidence, given its most sophisticated elaboration (yet one, in its

very sophistication, spelling its demise) in the ethnocentric and geocentric philosophy of Aristotle, that the human world of the polis is integrated into the divine world of the cosmos, the “great chain of being”.

Consequently, in Gadamerian terms, we could say that ancient tragedy indirectly imparts the kind of “moral knowledge” that cannot be “taught”, which is roughly in keeping not only with Aristotle’s ethics, but also with his poetics, where tragedy is afforded a central place. And this is (I surmise) because tragic drama does not concern strategic action as such, but the *goals* that we should set us – or should *not* set us. On the knowledge of such goals or ends, Gadamer writes:

Moral knowledge can never be knowable in advance like knowledge that can be taught. The relation between means and ends here is not such that one can know the right means in advance, and that is because the right end is not a mere object of knowledge either. There can be no anterior certainty concerning what the good life is directed toward as a whole. Hence Aristotle’s definitions of *phronesis* have a marked uncertainty about them, in that this knowledge is sometimes related more to the end, and sometimes more to the means to the end. In fact this means that the end toward our life as a whole tends and its elaboration in the moral principles of action described in Aristotle’s *Ethics* cannot be the object of a knowledge that can be taught. [Gadamer 01: 321]

Thus on my view ancient tragedy deals with the exposition of the very standards the human life should be measured against. Hence, in modern parlance, ancient tragic drama deals with issues of “ends” rather than “means”. This dimension of tragic drama, one could then say, is what makes it a powerful embodiment of the tenets of certain teleological conceptions of morality, conceptions that cannot be “taught” in the manner of technical skill or theoretical science. In short, tragedy imports a certain practical wisdom, or “*phronesis*”. Putting it in late-Heideggerian terms, ancient tragic drama is about taking (judging) the “measure” of man (in a similar way as Aristotle’s *phronesis* is about taking the proper measure of man, i.e. judging the Nichomachean “mean”), placing him in between “heaven” and “earth”.³⁹ This *is* the tragic wisdom in its ancient form, one might venture; the measure-taking that places man within an immanent continuum or context that it depends on for its fulfillment *as* man.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cf. the discussion of Aristotelian moral cosmology and its background in Greek piety in A. Borgmann’s essay ‘Broken Symmetries’ [Kompridis 06].

⁴⁰ Cf. what we said about “Gelassenheit” in Chapter 5.

But the above perspective, as we have stressed, loses its meaning if there *is* no such teleological context that can be taken more or less for granted, i.e. a context that one can *de facto* “return” to through the substantial commitments of “everyday” life,⁴¹ including, one should emphasize, cultic practices such as public festivals of tragic drama. Thus it is in contrast to what Gadamer takes to be the “affirmative” dimension of ancient tragedy (entrenched within a publicly recognized sense of the intertwinement of fate and logos, fate and *meaning*) that I regard *romanticist* tragedy as intrinsically “negative” in its orientation. That is, the romanticist tragic catharsis can be taken to merely acknowledge, in the face of the shock of a new experience of individual selfhood, our *exile* from the cosmic-political “kingdom”, from the holy precincts of an enchanted nature. Put in other words, romanticist tragedy cannot rely on the pre-modern *cyclical* reconciliation with the cosmos, hence must *wait forever*, substantial reconciliation infinitely deferred. Another way of putting this would be to say that the alienation from the divine is no longer perceived as temporary (as it was with the Greeks, the intervention of the gods restoring, in rather short order, the natural balance of things), but as a permanent condition, a permanent exile. That is, if you will, with the fall of the cyclical view of history the hope of redemption is transferred to the linear time-horizon associated with modernity, the hour of reckoning being postponed to “the end of time”.

Thus grief and consolation merge in the romanticist sense of life as “tragic”, its poetry offering a kind of release of our frustrated desires for reconciliation, but only for a brief moment, shortly returning us to a state of wistful waiting. Therefore, to the extent redemption is anticipated at all (typically figured as a memory of home, or childhood), it is in a bitter-sweet manner. Take for instance the lines from Wordsworth quoted by Cavell in ‘Texts of Recovery’:

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie to deep for tears

Indeed, this illustrates to Cavell how, as he writes, “Romanticism’s work ... interprets itself ... as the [perhaps impossible] task of bringing the world back to life.” [Cavell 94b: 52] Hence the convergence of the tragic-romanticist desire for an enchanted kingdom (consisting of the “things themselves”, and not merely of shadows or representations of them) in which man can dwell in peace with the cosmos, and a Wittgensteinian longing to bring language “home”, home to its “proper” place, is what Cavell indicates when he writes in CH&UH that

⁴¹ This is the thrust of Alisdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.

The irreconcilability [in] the human position between grandeur and debasement is, I find, matched in the irreconcilability in Wittgenstein between our dissatisfaction with the ordinary and our satisfaction in it, between speaking outside and inside language games ... the fact that poses a great task, the continuous task, of Wittgenstein's prose, oscillating between vanity and humility. [Cavell 90: 83]

And to the extent that Cavell imagines this process of oscillation as going on and on, without anything but sublime flashes of release, I think it is fair to say that, if it is to be read dramatically at all, the PU can be read as a romanticist *acknowledgment of exile*. We shall now proceed to examine this proposition.

The importance of being earnest

A closer look at the Idealist-romantic connections of the PU

If we return for a moment to the distinction between ancient and modern tragedy, we should recall the following: The ancient tragic drama operates within the parameters of a basically *enchanted* worldview (where the separation from the divine is only relative), while the romanticist variety is reacting to the disenchantment *of the world* (rather than the ill fate of an individual or family), and thus to the “death” of the gods (or God) as such, hence enacting an *absolute* separation from the divine. Accordingly, the historical context in which the romanticists adopted the vocabulary of ancient tragedy must of necessity force a shift of meaning on that vocabulary, one where the finitude of man is understood in more secular terms, and, at the same time is radicalized.

I. The problem of the ground of judgment as a point of entry

Now, one way of relating the tragic vocabulary to a more modern, and secular, philosophical horizon is to see it as emblematic of a problematic of *judgment*. This notion of romanticism as responding to an essentially modern *philosophical* problem – ultimately the problem of knowledge, or of skepticism – is what forms the basis of Cavell's engagement with it. Indeed, “I continue”, Cavell writes in ‘Texts of Recovery’

...to be guided by the thought of romanticism as working out a crisis of knowledge, a crisis I have taken to be (interpretable as) a response at once to the threat of skepticism and to a disappointment with

philosophy's answer to this threat, particularly as embodied in the achievement of Kant's philosophy – a disappointment most particularly with the way Kant balances the claims of knowledge of the world to be what you may call subjective and objective, or, say, the claims of knowledge to be dependent on or independent of the specific endowments – sensuous or intellectual – of the human being. And this in turn perhaps means a disappointment in the idea of taking the success of science, or what makes science possible, as an answer to the threat of scepticism, rather than a further expression of it. [Cavell 94b: 53]

Accordingly, the tragically inflected, dramatic-poetic structure of the PU which comes out of Cavell's dialogical reading of it could be seen to highlight the existential dimension of the modern problematic of "knowledge". I.e. it could be seen to highlight the existential dimension of what is now called "epistemology". This is why, as Cavell is keen to emphasize, that the PU's "literary" and "philosophical" dimensions truly merge; because it really *is* crucial to the unique character of the PU that the "classical" philosophical problems about "propositions", "names", "inferences" and so forth *are* highlighted in a wider existential perspective, and not merely forgotten about. (Which is why Wittgenstein, in that famous episode, could conflate his logic and his sins.)

Namely, on this view the PU articulates our anxiety in relation to what "ground" or "ideal" *found* our judgment in the absence of a divine order in the cosmos. Consequently, while the PU is not making any ontological commitment to the Idealist-romantic notion of the "Ideal" as such (much less the "Absolute"), it could be said to persist in circling the *idea* of it. Hence in the PU we are not dealing with an ideal that can be said to actually "exist" and which we have access to through some "metaphysical" faculty. Rather we are dealing with an ideal at a second remove: the projected idea of an ideal, an ideal that is imagined as always already "displaced" in relation to our position. I.e. we are disjoint to *it*, exiled; receding ever further from it. To quote Hölderlin's famous line from 'Hyperion', evoked by Eldridge in conjunction with his dramatic, more or less Cavellian reading of the PU in *Leading a Human Life*, where the lovers realize that

So was our own bliss to depart, and we foresaw it...

On this note the PU, like 'Hyperion', could be read as a work enacting experiences of distance and yearning, a sense of "departure". Thus an ambivalent attitude towards notions of "ideality" and "grounding", struggling with a longing for reconciliation in an absolute one no longer

believes in, could be seen as what underlies the strain of tragic sensibility embodied by the dramatic-poetic texture of the PU; this, indeed, might be said to constitute its romanticist *Heimweh*, as well as its modernist demand for “seriousness”, or as Cavell puts it, its “moral urgency”.

II. Interlude: From optimism to disenchantment

The fate of aesthetics as a source of assurance and consolation

Let me substantiate these connections with a glance backwards to the function of art and aesthetics in philosophical romanticism. Philosophical romanticism could be said to first pick up on, and then turn against, the notion that art and aesthetical judgment somehow makes available the absolute Ideal. Hence philosophical romanticism constitutes, as Beistegui argues, at various points of its development *both* a hope on behalf of the power of beauty, *and* a disillusionment with that hope. The first phase we could associate with what I would call optimistic romanticism, e.g. early Schiller and Hölderlin. Compare for instance the former’s letters from 1794 on the aesthetical-political “education” of mankind, maintaining that “the ideal of beauty has been given us at the same time with the ideal of humanity.” (Letter XVII, first paragraph.) Or compare what the latter writes in the ‘Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism’ from 1796:

I am now convinced that the highest act of reason, by encompassing all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are only siblings in *beauty*. [Bernstein 03: 186]

To the early Hölderlin, like to Schiller, aesthetical perfection *does* underwrite moral and cognitive perfection; implying that the aesthetical power of judgment underwrites all other endeavors, including political ones. Those aesthetically inspired political hopes however, were dashed with the corruption of the ideals of the French Revolution. Thence followed the second phase – or better: inflection – of romanticism, constituting what I would call *disenchanted* (or broken-hearted) romanticism, exemplified by the later Hölderlin, with his focus on elegy. The disenchanted Hölderlin now sees tragic drama as an enactment of the *impossibility* of reaching the absolute, rather than as a manifestation of it. Tragedy shows us that the “whole” can never be attained, that we are condemned to a “fragmentary” existence, which again means that reconciliation becomes infinitely deferred, something only to be gestured at.

The upshot of this decline into disenchantment of romanticist thought is that aesthetics no longer appears able to underwrite our ordinary judgments. The *je ne sais quoi* of aesthetics does not *found* judgment – it rather marks the hoped-for place of such foundations, a space which remains vacant. Thus we could say that the modernist sense of alienation, which we could take the PU to partake of (that is, in relation to Cavell’s dramatic reading of it), is prefigured by certain strains of romanticism, not the least in the elegiac writings of Hölderlin and Novalis. Indeed, Hölderlin writes near the end of his life, after his dream of an idealist system based on aesthetics has unraveled:

For they who lend us the heavenly fire, the
Gods, give us sacred sorrow too. Let it be so. A
son of earth I seem; born to love and to suffer.⁴²

At this point Hölderlin has given up on his metaphysics of beauty, where aesthetical sensibility underwrite judgment. Instead he has situated the contemplation of the beautiful within a horizon of exile, where the significance of beauty is not the positive *what is* (eternal, absolute being), but rather the *has been* or *should have been*, or even, perhaps, the eschatological *is not yet*. As Maurice Blanchot put it:

Hölderlin lives doubly in distress. His time is the empty time when what he has to live is the double absence of the gods, who are no longer *and* who are not yet. [Blanchot 95: 123]

Hence the focus on the despair of existential homelessness is hardly something original to twentieth century thought. However, numerous modern thinkers and artists have given this romanticist theme a decidedly twentieth century *form*. We might say that as romanticism turns into modernism, reacting to the concrete historical circumstances, the already perceived division between the “ideal” (home) and the “real” (exile) deepens. This mood of deepening alienation is caught well by T. S. Elliot in *The Wasteland* (1922):

Between the ideal
And the reality
Between the motion
And the Act
Falls the shadow

⁴² In the ode ‘Die Heimat,’ *Home*.

In *The Waste Land* and similar works of the period is recorded the suspicion that the “march of progress” is not bringing man closer to his true destination (closer to home); rather the opposite. In other words, the difference between Hölderlinian disenchanted romanticism and twentieth century modernism is, if anything, that the post-Enlightenment “shadow” has deepened. That is, the “shadow” representing the romanticist sense of man as “fallen”; a sense that eclipsed the brief period of utopian optimism surrounding the French Revolution. This amounted in a sense to a renewed, secularized dogma of primordial sin, the sense of being driven away from home by “progress” (hence the migration of eschatological terminology into secular modernity.) Finally, post-Auschwitz, the waste cans of Becket’s *Endgame* complements Eliot’s pre-Auschwitz *Waste Land*, Becket’s Ham noting that “there are no more coffins” left; proving the disenchanted romanticist’s morbid visions to have been far too optimistic. Or put another way: Becketian theatre becomes the limit of tragic drama, a theatre that acknowledges a situation that has gone *beyond* tragedy; one might say a theatre that portrays the demise of the vestigial *heroism* of romanticism.⁴³

Whatever one thinks of such notions, it does indicate that the modernist deepening of the “shadow” between the “real” and the “ideal” has to do with the perception that world history has become so absurd that it has gone beyond the purview of the tragic heroism of the romanticists. This leaves one at a “loss of words”, where poetry, or for that matter literature (including philosophical literature), hardly seems appropriate anymore. Hence high modernism takes disenchantment one step further than romanticism; the “kingdom” recedes, if possible, another step into the distance. Consequently, aesthetics (as a figuration of the kingdom) is even more radically displaced (alienated, exiled) from the centre of existence, from where it exerts only the weakest influence on human affairs. The relevance of the beautiful has become so deeply problematic that the project of art transforms from a celebration of beauty into a questioning of it; indeed into a questioning of art itself, as we touched on in the previous chapter, every new work, if it is “serious”, posing the Hamletian question if art is still possible at all.

⁴³ Even death, as Adorno notes in his commentary on Becket, having lost its poignancy when it is converted to industrial slaughter. Thus tragic-heroic death, according to Adorno, the last stronghold of romanticism, was ultimately what succumbed in Auschwitz. Consequently, not only poetry, but also traditional tragic drama, becomes to Adorno fundamentally problematic in the post-romantic situation following Holocaust. Strictly speaking, only the anti-drama of a Becket and the anti-poetry of a Celan are admissible (as well as the anti-music of a Schönberg.)

But this means, after even the blank canvas and the urinal have come to seem like bourgeois clichés, that the alienated self hardly has any resources left to express its sense of exile with. And the result of this is not that the sense of exile lifts, but that it becomes *mute*. Thus the loss, with the marginalization of truly “tragic” art, of a representation of the plight of the finite subject, brings to the fore a *cultural* problem that philosophical modernism typically understands itself as dealing with: Namely that in the modern industrial-commercial culture the alienation has become so internalized that it is no longer recognized for what it is. Rather, people seem to identify with alienation. In commercialized, industrialized culture (the idea goes) we hardly find existential homesickness, except in the forms of kitsch and clichés. Thus the constant inrush of “entertainment” serves as a defense against having to acknowledge anything like Novalis and Hölderlin’s *Heimweh*. Indeed, the increasing need to be stimulated round the clock was presaged by Pascal when he said that nothing is so intolerable as being fully at rest, “without entertainment”, anticipating the twentieth century criticism of the culture industry. Namely, to these critics (whether on the right or on the left), the lack of cultural resources to genuinely deal with the problems of modernity, creates an atmosphere were we cannot even mobilize shock or grief or true elation at the “death of God”. Indeed, what Nietzsche once thought of as a terrible insight – the absence of reassurance in a notion of the Absolute – is cloaked in bland indifference. If at all, the “death of God” is registered with a shrug.

Speaking with T. S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*, we might say that the “old world” has indeed ended with a whimper rather than a bang. That complacency, one might say (interpretable as an exhaustion from the perpetual shock of the new), that failure to take an existential stand regarding the (tragic absence of) ultimate validation of our words and deeds, even the most ordinary ones, the failure to face that terrible responsibility *soberly*, is the target of philosophical modernism, from Nietzsche onwards. Thus from Nietzsche’s time – and we could mention Ibsen and Freud and Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer and Marx as well – there is a call from the exiled margin of society to combat hypocrisy and complacency in modern life, a hypocrisy and complacency due to an outward adherence to forms of culture that one no longer “authentically” practice.

III. A duty to oneself

The PU and a moral perfectionist view of language

Struggles with meaning and despair

In keeping with this I surmise that what Cavell sees as the modern tradition of “moral perfectionist” writers since Emerson and Nietzsche is largely about the call for an acknowledgement of a duty, highlighted by tragedy (old and new), towards oneself – the duty to transform oneself and one’s society into a responsible, living entity, one that does not cling to the “dead” culture of kitsch and clichés, skating over the abyss rather than staring into it. Meaning that if we *are* to adhere to something out of the past – say religion, or philosophy, art, anything – we have an “ethical” obligation (to our own self) to inherit it in a *serious* manner. Indeed, this obligation to appropriate the past in a *serious* manner designates an uncompromising, perfectionist mode of morality which, writes Cavell, “pass through moments of opposites such as Kant and Mill, include such various figures as Kleist and Ibsen and Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, and end at my doorstep with Heidegger and Wittgenstein.” [Cavell 90: 2] I understand this to mean that the trouble with talking “nonsense” is not that one is violating some grammatical rule, but that one is creating a division internally to one’s self, as well as in the relations of that self to others, which means that one is exiling or alienating oneself. Therefore, Cavell writes in ‘The Argument of the Ordinary’ that

A moral I derive from the *Investigations* along these lines is accordingly: I am not to give myself explanations that divide me from myself, that take sides against myself, that would exact my consent, not attract it. That would cede my voice to my isolation. Then I might never be found. [Cavell 90: 100]

When Cavell here writes “a moral I derive”, I think we could read: “a *morality* I derive”. *This*, we could say, is at the heart with the PU’s struggle with language: the ethics of “finding” (and founding) oneself by being “true” to one’s words. Thus if we recognize the existential import of words, a perfectionist ethics would also comprise an ethics of how we *treat* words, and therefore also the persons and things we relate to in terms of those words. (Which is why Emerson can complain, in condemnation of a whole society, that “every word they say chagrin us.”) This would entail an ethics that admonishes us to take seriously not only what we say but also *how* we say it. Thus we should not be surprised when Cavell professes that

...each of my ventures in and from philosophy bears on ways of understanding the extent to which my relation to myself is figured in my relation to my words. [Cavell 02: xxiv]

This serious attention to words inherently brings, as we have seen, both an aesthetical-poetic and a tragic-dramatic dimension into the work of Cavell, as it does into that of Wittgenstein. Aesthetic-poetic because it invests heavily in the expressivity of language (however attenuated), and tragic-dramatic because it highlights our “critical” or “fateful” dependence on human, all too human words, and the dire consequences for our “soul” (self) when we try to avoid that dependence by accepting false reassurances from various quarters, including facile “explanations” of how language works.

In sum: The alignment of the drama of the PU with a narrative of romantic despair emphasizes the “dark” bent of Wittgenstein’s work, and consequently make also Cavell’s writings partake of what Pippin calls the “modernist negativity, dissatisfaction, or despair”. Thus in Cavell’s dramatic reading of the PU, Wittgenstein’s recourse to brief, almost sublime moments of poetic-aphoristic satisfaction as a placeholder for reconciliation could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the absence of genuine notions of the “Ideal” within modern culture. Which is an acknowledgment of the double problem of alienation that besets modernity.

And this notion of alienation, as we touched on in Chapter 3, is analyzed by Cavell in terms of a notion of “theatricality”.

From Shakespeare to Emerson

Tragedy, authenticity and theatricality

Towards a modern view

Cavell’s “modern” idea of tragedy is closely connected to notions of skepticism and *theatricality*. These connections are, as we saw in Chapter 3, represented paradigmatically in Shakespeare’s work. Let us therefore just recapitulate that Cavell’s way of describing, with a sidelong glance at Shakespeare’s “the world is but a stage,” the nature of the skeptical position is to say that it *is* “theatrical.” This perspective is also central to Cavell’s analysis – as we saw, resembling Hegel’s – of the link between skepticism and modernity. The invocation of the

image of a *stage* alludes to the early-modern notion of the “theatre of the mind” associated with Locke and Descartes. Thus Cavell notes that in early modernity the world “traumatically” receded out of reach just at the moment one was about to grasp it “epistemically” once and for all, inviting a feeling of being left on the “outside” of things. I.e. by closing out the contingent, what cannot be known for certain, the skeptic, or the skeptical subject, has closed *himself* out from the plenitude of the world.

The “cost,” in the Cavellian terminology, of that avoidance is that the skeptic with his epistemic vocabulary brackets the *substance* of the leading of a human life. The world dies, and the tragic self, no longer able to recognize himself in the Other (as well as in the ordinary things around us), empties out. Thus the story of *Othello* is according to Cavell’s reading in a most literal sense about the failed “marriage” of subjectivities, their failure to reach mutual acknowledgement. The fatal weakness of Othello, the tragic flaw, is that he is unable to trust implicitly in Desdemona. Instead of trusting implicitly, the skeptic, like Othello, demands *proof*, irrevocable proof of what goes on in another’s mind; but the more he demands proof, the deeper he sinks into the quagmire of radical doubt. In the end, *nothing* can satisfy him, and nothing, i.e. *death*, is what he gets. The human figure returns to inanimation, like an automaton switched off. Life turns to stone, vitality is sapped, leaving behind only an empty certainty:

So [Othello and Desdemona] are there, on their bridal and death sheets. A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not. The two bodies lying together form an emblem of this fact, the truth of skepticism. What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little. [Cavell 99: 142]

According to this type of reading we could say that: (1) Shakespearean tragic theatre becomes a reflection on the nature and cost of a skepticism that is in it self theatrical, and tragic *because* it is theatrical. (2) The plot of Shakespeare’s plays becomes meta-commentaries on the medium of (modern) theatre as such. (3) Shakespeare’s plays become a reflection on the skeptical-theatrical nature of modernity which indicates that it, too, is essentially tragic. This means that theatre is important to Cavell for the same reason as the problematic of skepticism is important (and not to be lightly dismissed): it reminds us of the problematic of the self, especially in modernity. Thus Cavell writes in *Disowning Knowledge*:

Tragedy is the place we are not allowed to escape the consequences, or price, of [skepticism]: that the failure to acknowledge a best case of the other is a denial of the other, presaging the death of the other, and the death of our capacity to acknowledge as such, the turning of our hearts to stone, or their bursting [Cavell 03: 138].

Hence the modern tragedy, as exemplified by Shakespeare, becomes, like the ancient variety, a *warning*. A warning to “turn around”, before it is too late, to mend one’s ways. Yet the difference, as I understand Cavell’s analysis, is that the modern tragedy of Shakespeare, qua modern, is more acutely oriented towards the problem of the self, the self as such. Meaning that the warning, or call to conversion, issued by modern tragedy has to do with a much more individualized problematic than what was the case with the ancient Greeks. Hence we could say that the modern tragedy of Shakespeare operates more or less independently of the ancient mytho-poetic understanding of “fate”; which also means that it operates more or less independently of the mytho-poetic means of reconciling with that fate. And this, I gather, is what renders the work of Shakespeare so central to Cavell’s understanding of “Emersonian” moral perfectionism. Namely, Shakespeare no longer relies on the pre-modern assumptions about the cosmos and the polis which defined the Greek notions of subjectivity and freedom, including their notions of the reconciliation of freedom and subjectivity in a cosmic-political whole. Specifically, the ethnocentrism and geocentrism that informed the Greek imagination ceases, in the age of Shakespeare, to define the tragic cosmology. For instance, as it is put in *Julius Caesar*: “The fault dear Brutus is not in our stars; but in ourselves”. This modernity of outlook is figured by Shakespeare’s allusions and references to the Copernican⁴⁴, almost Pascalian, universe, as when he lets Hamlet exclaim

Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space –

Indeed, what takes the place of geocentrism and ethnocentrism in Shakespeare (as in Descartes) is, one could say, *egocentrism*. And, as we suggested in Chapter 5, this egocentrism could be regarded as characterizing both skepticism and perfectionism’s preoccupation with the individual self, with its problematic relation to the social whole and “things as they are”, as well as its constant need for confirmation of its own existence.

⁴⁴ Cf. Frances Yates’ work on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan age, such as *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*.

Yet even if we look at things in this perspective, we could still surmise that the “new” tragedy is, as the ancient one, serving as a vehicle for instruction. The difference, however, is that what is at stake is no longer the education of the Greek citizen of the polis, but the education of the self *as self*, apart from all national and institutional affiliations, which is a very modern notion, namely the idea of the human as such. In short, the “new” tragedy can be read as an instruction in the *mastery of the modern self*. Consequently, if we heed the warning of the “new” tragedy, learning from Othello and the others, we are called to a *moral perfectionist education*. And the first (and last) task of a perfectionist education is to combat skeptical and dogmatic “theatricality” which threaten to *alienate* me from that continuity of meaning which allows me to be continuous with myself. And what is that “theatricality”, specifically? It is a lack of will to “authorize” myself, to *speak in my own voice*, as well as to listen to the voice of the other.

Accordingly Cavell is led, in a conjunction of the “dramatic” reading of the PU and his “modern” reading of Shakespeare, to the Nietzschean notion that since we cannot find *any* sense or “centre” in the world as such (i.e. since we no longer believe that the “ideal” systematically informs the “real”); we have to, on the model of the modernist work of art (especially after Duchamp), create sense *ex nihilo*, out of our own resources. This, it seems to me, is what lies behind Cavell’s contention (which also is an analysis of the roots of modernity in the intuitions of Descartes) that

...what I am is one who to exist *enacts* his existence is an answer Descartes might almost have given himself ... Descartes’s word for what I call ‘enacting’ – or ‘claiming’ or ‘staking’ or ‘acknowledging’ – is ‘authoring’ ... Apparently it is the very sense of my need for a human proof of my human existence – some authentication – that is the source of the idea that I need an author. [Cavell 94b: 109, my italic]

The crux to Cavell, of course, is that in Descartes it is implicitly revealed that this author is not God, but ourselves, which is also the hidden thrust of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Thus Descartes’ *Meditations*, along with *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, works and characters struggling with their burdens of proof, prefigure the cataclysm of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* (which again can be seen as foreshadowed by Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*.) All this, one might say, belong to the birth-pangs of modernity, a “crisis” wherein is born modern subjectivity, indeed, a crisis that persists to this day, because the form of that subjectivity *is* crisis; a constant crisis of authentication or authoring, of if you will, of making oneself intelligible. This means, in the semi-eschatological language that goes with modernism, as it goes with perfectionism, that we

must not only be *prophets* in order to proclaim the coming of a new order: we must *become* that new order, the creatures of our own creation, which means that we in effect must become our own messiah, our own *God*. Thus the self must be both alpha *and* omega, totally self-authoring, or as Cavell puts it in ‘Ending the Waiting Game’:

We are Christ or we are nothing⁴⁵

Meaning, I take it, that the only way to end the waiting for a redeemer, is to redeem ourselves. Consequently, what in modernism ultimately replaces the classical notion of the “Ideal” (which already can be regarded as a replacement for the divinity of monotheistic religion) is so to speak a demand for “authenticity”, or *seriousness*, taking full responsibility for everything we say and do, an uncompromising attitude that gives us a final vestige of something “absolute” to hold on to. On this view the solution to the crisis of intelligibility cannot be effectuated once and for all; it can only be resolved by *making* ourselves intelligible, to ourselves and each other, constantly calling the elusive self into language, like a continuous “baptism”, and by the same token, a constant struggle with the threat and temptation of skepticism.

This offers us a point of departure for a renewed evaluation of the motivation and nature of Cavell’s appropriation of the work of Austin. We shall first look at Cavell’s radical modernist and perfectionist approach to that work, and then at the diverging views of tragedy that can be said to inform Cavell and Austin’s view of ordinary language, and which, according to Cavell, barred Austin from a deeper appreciation of the significance of his own project. Or at least impeded its radical expression.

“Our word is our bond”

Cavell’s criticism of Austin

To recapitulate: We have found it characteristic of Cavell’s philosophical modernism that in terms of the philosophy of ordinary language, his “perfectionism” could be understood as a criticism of the indifference regarding whether we really *can* or *must* mean what we say. On this rather unorthodox view ordinary language philosophy responds to the situation which Marx described with the diagnosis that “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned”, which now is taken to include the profanation and melting into air of the very *means*

⁴⁵ [Cavell 94: 147]

of intelligibility. Hence at this historical juncture, in this crisis of intelligibility, moral perfectionism, philosophical modernism and the “ethics” of language-use converge. To the perfectionist writer (figured by Wittgenstein in the PU) it becomes a duty to oneself to be hyper-critical of how one puts things, what linguistic nuances one employs, what conventions one rely on.⁴⁶ We could say that to care for the “state of one’s language” becomes a dimension of caring for the “state of one’s soul”, so that to use words in a careless fashion, blithely accepting clichés and “empty talk”, is put on par with hazarding one’s very humanity, one’s soul.⁴⁷ In this perfectionist perspective OLP can be seen as a project that aims to combat our consumer-like complacency about words – whether ordinary or philosophical – a contention that is the exact contrary of the more common notion that ordinary language philosophy is about accepting any “given” usage of words, and uncritically so.

The key question in OLP, then, is not so much “is this use of language ordinary?”, but “can this use of language do any *work*, can it manage to *say* something, or is it merely empty talk?” Which is more on the order of the problem: Can we *make* this language ordinary; can we *use* it, adopt it in our lives, or does it merely “spin in the void”? In short, the central question of OLP is: “How does this use of language stand to a form of life, real or imagined?” Thus we might surmise that OLP is not necessarily against language that is “out of the ordinary”, it is merely against language that does not have any resonance in our “real needs”, and therefore obscures such needs. Needs that we may not be able to recognize – that is articulate or acknowledge – before we have actually liberated our language from its “false idols”, the Wittgensteinian “pictures” that lead us astray.

In this perspective OLP implies that in modernity a “philosophical” level of conscientiousness must in principle be directed at the most humble words, because in modernity nothing, as Marx noted in the Manifesto, is beyond question anymore. Correspondingly, skeptical doubts about language tend to lead to skeptical doubts about our own “self”, because, thrown back on our solipsistic resources (our “private languages”) we no longer have access to means of expression that are potent enough make our self convincingly *public*. Thus we fail to articulate our human subjectivity-in-community, to express convincingly that *I am*, am not only because I have a “mind”, but because I have a *voice*, a voice that is “attuned” to my fellow human beings.

⁴⁶ Cp. Janik and Toulmin’s alignment of Wittgenstein’s attitude to language with that of Karl Kraus and the Viennese avant-garde in *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*.

⁴⁷ Cf. [Cavell 90: 2]

Against this background the existential – one might call it “ethical”, or even “religious” – intensity of Austin and Wittgenstein’s devotion to the examination of ordinary language can be regarded as emblematic of an attempt to treat ordinary words at least *as if* they were sacred, to “reenchant” everyday speech, albeit in a strictly modern way. Indeed, that Austin responded to modern language’s all but inaudible echo of pre-modern magic is suggested by his brief invocation of the fateful power of words in Greek tragedy. “Our word,” Austin wrote in *How to Do Things With Words*, alluding to the oath sworn by the main character in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, “is our bond.” [Cavell 96a: 89]

Austin might as well have said: Our word is our *law*. Or: Our word is *sacred*. Indeed, the ancients’ estimation for the words of an oath as intrinsically sacred, the swearing of it typically accompanied by invocation of the deities and ritual offerings, invites the thought that in the Austinian notion of our word being our “bond” (in the sense that words commit us beyond our private wills, that they are truly *public*) and the wider notion of words being *deeds* – there reverberates a faint echo of magic and myth. Thus the modern dilemma, unwittingly illustrated by Austin, is that we seem to be as unable to live without this magic (understood as powers transcending human will and understanding) as with it. As Pippin writes in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*:

Reason can now completely determine for itself what is to count as nature itself; but (and here the beginning of the *aporia*) in some sense it cannot be satisfied with the result, must be dissatisfied with its “ignorance of things in themselves.” Or, pure reason can be practical; we can determine the will on the basis of a strictly universalizable maxim; however, there is little chance that we could ever actually overcome our self-interest sufficiency for this to be very likely. We must settle for “legality,” not morality. [Pippin 99:11]

The dilemma Pippin is highlighting here is: If our norms (bonds) are self-imposed, how can they really be binding? If they depend only on our own will, can we not revoke them at any moment? *That* is our modern paradox or *aporia*. And indeed, the failure to recognize this dilemma is the point on which Cavell faults Austin. Because in flatly declaring that “our word is our bond” Austin is skating over the crisis of intelligibility that so concerns Cavell. Austin is assuming – without flagging the assumption – the *intrinsic* normativity of language, and therefore avoids the problematic of a modern self committed to an aporetic notion of autonomy.

Clearly the modern world does not recognize an Olympian Zeus that will strike us down if we forfeit our word. Yet this liberation from our bondage to the gods, when worked out to its logical consequence, may come to strike us as more paralyzing than exhilarating. Because, as Richard Eldridge remarks, in

...being connected by nature with no routes of public practice (other than those perhaps legislated within), the self and its will are sometimes seen as capable of tyrannizing over everything, capable of finding meaning and content only through furies of the negation of everything the self encounters as opposite to it. Or, more modestly, the sense of the self as private [sovereign] is seen as enforcing an excessive detachment and reserve, a continuing failure of intimacy. The very varieties of available possibilities of practice seems to inhibit commitment to anything ... Autonomy seems to yield anomie. [Eldridge 97:21]

Reacting to those modernist issues (anticipated, as we have seen, in romanticism), Cavell's complaint against Austin is that barring the intervention of higher powers, nothing we could *say* (like "may God strike me down if I lie" or "you *must* believe me" or "this is true, really" or simply the predicate "is true") can in itself guarantee the truthfulness of what we are saying. Yet Austin proceeds to analyze ordinary language as if this was the case, that we could, somehow, categorically separate the "serious" from the "unserious" use of words. This "Freudian slip" on Austin's part is examined by Cavell in the essay 'Counter-Philosophy and the Pawn of Voice.' Cavell writes:

When the issue of seriousness is initially opened by Austin in that same passage from the first chapter of *How to Do Things with Words* which produces Hippolytus, he frames it as one of those semi-questions that indicate they are asserting a proposition too obvious to quite say: "Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously?'" He goes on to concede what goes without more than semi-saying: "This is, though vague, true enough in general – it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem," nor be, it occurs to him to state in the next chapter, an actor on the stage. I note the designation "commonplace in discussing." What he is about to take up is not a simple or sheer commonplace, one you might come across in common places. [Cavell 96a: 95]

Meaning that our word is *not* our bond; it is more like a rubber-band than the iron chain of fate forged on the anvil of the gods familiar from ancient tragic drama. Because, as Cavell goes on

...what, in such places, would we be urging upon one another commonly in proposing that we speak so as to be taken “seriously”? Good advice might be not to speak while chewing gum or while wearing a comic hat or while in an uncontrollable fit of winking (all pertinent, if well-worn, gags, doubtless born of the same anxieties as these solemn discussions of doubts about being taken seriously). [Cavell 96a: 95]

Hence, instead of relying on the sacred power of our vows, as Pippin draws attention to, in the modern world the morality (or magical residue) of words is being increasingly supplanted by legalism, ultimately the institutional apparatus of the state and the whole contractarian view of human community. Thus by unreflectively retaining the archaic notion that our word *is* our bond, Austin is overlooking what Cavell calls the “truth”, or threat, of skepticism. Hence Austin is as it were *repressing* something in his text, namely the skeptical “voice”. Writes Cavell:

I have criticized Austin’s views at length for their fateful rejection of the threat of skepticism, or let us say their exclusion of it. In a word ... my criticism has been that Austin’s way of rejecting skepticism’s pressure amounts to a refusal to see the possibility of the repudiation of ordinary concepts by, as it were, themselves. In my lingo – following an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s response that I have pressed and that I realize remains controversial – this means failing to see our possibility of repudiating our agreement in terms of which words have criteria of relation (to the world, of the world) given in the human life form. But this means failing to see the impotence in words that skepticism fastens upon and the simultaneous power compacted in those same words ... [Cavell 96a: 97]

What I take away from this is that the reason Cavell shifts his focus from Austin to Wittgenstein is that the “dramatic” (read tragic, romantically tragic) structure of the *Investigations* is able to acknowledge the “truth” of skepticism that Austin avoids by naively stipulating that our word is our bond. Indeed, we suggested that the same avoidance is manifest, or even more manifest, in Malcolm and Albritton’s “apodictic” notion of criteria, in Baker and Hacker’s appeal to rules, and in general, in all “undialectical” views of ordinary language that does not recognize the “moment” or possibility of skepticism internal to language-use as such, which comes to the same thing as failing to acknowledge the modern crisis of intelligibility.

The unbearable lightness of words

Excesses of liberty and the tragedy of language

In view of the above it is pertinent to look more closely into what Cavell has to say in ‘Counter-Philosophy’ about Austin’s invocation of tragedy in the context of ordinary language philosophy. Namely, I will argue that Cavell in effect is pushing for what I have called a “modern” understanding of the *Hippolytus*, while Austin seems to understand this work on the traditional pattern of the “old” tragedy. That is, as we have seen, in stipulating that “our word is our bond”, Austin makes reference to the ancient Greek notion of fate. From his brief comments, Austin appears to perceive tragic drama as typically being about individuals that are dragged to their destiny in the “bonds” of their oaths, oaths made with words, i.e. with speech-acts. Indeed, this might be said to constitute a quite standard interpretation of ancient tragedy. Cavell, on the other hand, as part of his criticism of Austin, expresses what I regard as a more “modern” view: Tragic drama, according to Cavell’s interpretation, is about individuals that “go under” because of their *failure* to let words work their power, individuals that utterly exempt themselves from the “drag” of speech-acts. In this sense the tragic figures might be regarded as essentially *modern*, in that they fail to respect fate. Thus in one way they are “free”, but by the same token they are alienated from the polis and the cosmos that could give sense and meaning to their freedom.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ This corresponds quite closely to Eldridge’s invocation of the conceptual pair of Wille and Willkür in his reading of the drama of the PU. The underlying dilemma he detects in the text is our inability to live both with and without some kind of transcendent justification of our words and deeds, an ultimate underpinning of normativity as such. This double bind give us the classical problem of “Wille” and “Willkür”, what Eldridge calls the problem of “expressive freedom” in *Leading a human life*, where he states that in Kantian-Hegelian terms

...the standing problem for any moral subject, and for any culture of moral subjects, is that of passing from a life dominated by Willkür to a life informed by Wille. Willkür is simple volitional freedom, an arbitrium liberum ... This power of choice is not, however, a matter of the strongest inclination or desire forcing an action on a passive subject. Rather, it is Willkür itself that determines which inclination or desire is strongest for it and hence decisive for action ... Wille, in contrast, is not a power or spontaneity but rather the law or normative content of free willing ... Because this rational norm of Wille is present within us, capable of informing Willkür and providing its most powerful incentives, coming to lead a rational, free, and fully human life is hence a matter of Wille, this rational norm or law, coming to have effect in Willkür. [Eldridge 97: 45]

The problem is how, exactly, “Wille, this rational norm or law” comes to “have effect in Willkür.” How can the subject realize its freedom in the world without that world in some sense encroaching on the subject, making it less than totally self-legislating, making it unfree? Or, the other way around, how can the subject be totally self-legislating without losing the world?

Hence while in Austin's understanding the tragic figure (like Oedipus) is simply enchained by forces greater than he, something he discovers to his chagrin, in Cavell's case the tragic figure (like Othello) is diabolically *released* from all bonds (from all binding forms of trust, commitment and publicness, released from fate itself in a sense), which is what eventually destroys him and everything he loves. Othello's subjectivity is given free reign, unchecked by the gods, and the result is devastating. Indeed, it is *free will itself*, or his inability to master it, that seems to undo him. Thus for the likes of Othello and Hamlet freedom turns into unfreedom (crippling doubt) as they alienate themselves from the substantial conditions that would have allowed them to live out their freedom in a constructive manner. Hence the view of tragic drama that I am attributing to Cavell pertains to something which we could call the tragedy of *excess of freedom*. And what could be more modern?

Now, the key issue here is that Cavell projects this understanding of tragedy (and the self) back onto the work of Euripides. In short, he wants to read Euripides as if he was Shakespeare, or at least as a foreshadowing of Shakespeare. Which means that Cavell must show that the *Hippolytus* can be read as an enactment of the threat, or "truth", of skepticism. Consequently, to bring out the skeptical truth latent in Euripides' tragedy, Cavell quotes a passage where Theseus expresses the following wish:

If there were
some token now, some mark to make the division
clear between friend and friend, the true and the false!
All men should have two voices, one the just voice,
and one as chance would have it. In this way
the treacherous scheming voice would be confuted
by the just, and we should never be deceived. [Cavell 96a: 101]

This is an absurd scenario, Cavell points out, since we would never know for sure which voice was the "just" one. These voices would themselves be locked in a tragic struggle, ever disputing the other's claim to truth. Thus according to Cavell the *Hippolytus* is not primarily suited to illustrate what kind of excuses somebody might (fallaciously) use to get out of their word of honor; rather, it is better used to convey that

...there are no marks or tokens – to use the terms of Theseus's wish –
by which to distinguish the genuine or real from the false and the fake
[which] is a way of putting Wittgenstein's discovery (according to me)
... that there are not what he calls criteria for distinguishing reality and
dream, or, I add, animate and inanimate, or sincerity or seriousness and

hollowness or treachery, hence no way of *blocking* the threat of skepticism. [Cavell 96a: 102]

The Freudian slip of Austin, on Cavell's reading, is therefore that he assumed that he *could* block skepticism out of his account by simply assuming that people *are* using language "seriously" – reserving "unserious" use (including deception) as parasitical and parenthetical cases. Cavell instead urges us to acknowledge that the "threat" of skepticism pervades language through and through, rendering it a "thin net over the abyss", depending ultimately on nothing more and nothing less than our elusive attunement to the world and each other. That we (in order to live out our freedom) have to depend on this unfounded and unfindable attunement *is*, to Cavell, the tragic truth of human existence. It is the truth of finitude, of mortality – and also (rightly understood) the truth of skepticism. And with this sense of tragic unfoundedness, there comes a certain mixture of liberation and, as in antiquity, *horror*, the horror of the abyss. In consequence, what OLP presents us with, as Cavell writes in a passage that by now has become famous:

...is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying. [Cavell 94: 52]

Cavell is in a way exhorting us, like Nietzsche, to stare into the abyss until the abyss stares back at us. He wants us to soberly acknowledge the abysmal or "uncanny" as part of our lives – our *everyday* lives. To acknowledge it, so that we can live with it *without avoidance*.

In sum, we could say that in Austin, it is taken for granted that language has the power to function in a "sacramental" way, providing, or taking part of, what in a very general sense could be called a "rite of passage". That is, according to Austin, the way we "do things with words", our "speech acts" partake of significant *events* where the self, and the community, so to speak "passes" from one state to another. On this view, when I say "I promise", this effectuates an event where I in fact *do* promise, hence am transported, in a more or less objective way, from a state of uncommittedness to a state of committedness. Thus to Austin, the moral of tragedy would be that this committedness *is* in a sense objective, a real bond, hence that transgressions of the bonds and boundaries established by our speech-acts would, as it were, ultimately be punished by "fate". This view of things is mirrored by how the ancient festivals of tragic drama in themselves were regarded as a sort of "rite of passage", marking the transport of one season into another; indeed, it is mirrored in how the "catharsis" of the

spectators could be considered as a passage from a “impure” into a “pure” state of the self and the community. In contrast, to Cavell, as a self-conscious modernist, this whole complex of assumptions and convictions is questionable, and *that* is the tragedy of it. I.e. the real tragedy, the modern tragedy, is that we can no longer assume that transgressions of speech-acts are as it were punished by the “cosmos” itself. Namely, this is the tragic aporia that faces us, as we try, like in modernist art, to create an order of intelligibility *ex nihilo*, without support from the belief in a transcendent or ideal agency operating in the world (and language), some form of cosmic “logos”.

Another way of putting this would be to say that to Austin, words are still invested with a certain *gravitas*; they are “heavy”, so heavy that, if we are not careful with them, they may drag us down into the grave, the netherworld. To Cavell, on the other hand, words can be unbearably light, light to the point of rarefying into air, and, being lighter even than air, carrying us into the frictionless vacuum of space. The question is, of course, which of those visions is most tragic: The one signifying the unbearable heaviness, or the one signifying the unbearable lightness of being? To Cavell, as I have already suggested, the latter vision appears by far the most fearsome. It is abysmal, horrifying, inviting the skeptical nightmare. Thus the moral of tragedy (when interpreted in the hindsight of modernity) seems, on what I take to be Cavell’s reading, to be that absolute liberty, liberty without dependence on substantial conditions of freedom, turns into its dialectical opposite, which is paralysis of the self.

But what this suggests to us, is that the emergence of modern tragedy records what Cavell calls in *Disowning Knowledge* a “catastrophe” of our world-view, where what is called into question is the confidence in the unfolding of events as a meaningful, *continuous* affair, the same day after day, capable of supporting an “everyday” language. Namely, what is brought into question is the belief, metaphorical or not, of the “punishment” of the gods, in the sense that this punishment (arriving as a function of our transgressions) is what restores the “natural balance” in the world.⁴⁹ In relation to Cavell’s criticism of Austin’s treatment of Euripides, this means that what is called into question by the modern tragedy (unsuspected, apparently, by Austin), *is* exactly the notion that what we “do” with words is underwritten by some kind of

⁴⁹ This suggests that the assuredness of the punishment of the gods serves as the guarantee for reconciliation; which also suggests that one should expect the hope for redemption to be attenuated in proportion to the attenuation of the fear of divine punishment.

cosmic order, an order which insures that what we say has more or less *predictable consequences*.

In conclusion, this train of thought indicates the following:

(1) Cavell's "modern" view of tragedy is more geared towards the problem of skepticism, and therefore towards the radical problematic of the self and its freedom, than Austin's.

(2) This discrepancy is reflected in their respective views of ordinary language and its threat by radical doubt, which is what renders Austin's approach (from a philosophical modernist point of view) naïve or anachronistic, taking language and intelligibility for granted, effectively positing them as a "cosmic order".

But before we turn to a final analysis of the significance of this to Cavell's modernist philosophical style, and his "politics of interpretation", we shall shift our attention to another medium that to Cavell figures the crisis of intelligibility in an exemplary way, indeed, in a sense continuing, and raising the stakes of, the work of tragic drama: Cinema.

Chapter 8

Behind the silver screen

Cinema, presentness and absence

*Alone, hidden in a dark room, we watch through half-open blinds a spectacle that is unaware of our existence and which is part of the universe. There is nothing to prevent us from identifying ourselves in imagination with the moving world before us, which becomes the world.*⁵⁰

Cavell's discussion of theatricality and tragic drama finds a natural complement in his work on film, starting with the seminal *The World Viewed* from 1971. This work, which is inspired in part by Heidegger's critique of representational objectivism⁵¹ and in part by André Bazin's "realistic" theory of film,⁵² will be the focus of our discussion, with some remarks on how it relates to Cavell's later studies of Hollywood genres in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*. It will be my argument that Cavell regards film, in its very mode of "projecting" a world, to be implicitly thematizing the existential problematic of epistemic objectivity vs. everyday substantiality (the substantiality we are *attuned* to), and thereby the vicissitudes of "presentness" and community – in short our being-together-in-the-world – which in his later work is ideally figured as "marriage" and "friendship." We could say that while *The World Viewed* is essaying a medium-specific analysis of the art of cinema (with an eye to modernist issues), Cavell's books on Hollywood classics transforms the earlier discussion of film-ontology into a genre-specific meditation on essentially romanticist and moral perfectionist issues as they pertain to modern life. Hence cinema, to Cavell, touches essentially on the problematic of the modern self and its crisis of intelligibility, its precarious position between kingdom and exile.

⁵⁰ André Bazin quoted in [Jay 94: 460].

⁵¹ Cf. Heidegger: "... the film attests to what it shows by presenting also the camera and its operators at work. The peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness is reached by the television, which will soon pervade and dominate the whole machinery of communication". [Heidegger 01: 163]

⁵² Cf. Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*: "The most vigorous and influential exponent of what might be called phenomenological realism was André Bazin, who famously insisted that photography and the cinema 'satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.'" [Jay 94: 459]

The classical discourse of cinematic realism:

Bazin and the myth of total cinema

In order to supply some context we will examine briefly the ideas of Bazin, ideas that simultaneously bring into the picture two thinkers whose thoughts on photography hover in the background of Cavell's discussion, namely Roland Barthes and Siegfried Kracauer. That is, as Martin Jay writes, "Like the great German film critic and theorist Siegfried Kracauer, with whom he has often been compared, Bazin marvelled at the film's 'redemption of physical reality.'" [Jay 94: 460] In my view it is this utopian vision of a "redemption" of the immanent world by cinematic realism that really interests Cavell. In this perspective, these three great theorizers of photographic realism – Kracauer, Bazin and Barthes – form the natural backdrop of Cavell's analysis in *The World View*, an analysis that could be said to pertain as much to the utopian realist *discourse* surrounding film as to film itself. That is, what Cavell is analyzing is in effect the power of the very *ideal* of realism figured by cinema. Indeed, summarizing the main tenets of the underlying notion of photographic transparency, Martin Jay remarks in *Downcast Eyes* that

So powerful has the assumption of photography's fidelity to the truth of visual experience been that no less an observer than the great film critic André Bazin could claim that 'for the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man ... Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature.' And even Roland Barthes could argue in his early essay on 'The Photographic Message' that 'certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: it is a message without a code.' [Jay 94: 126]

Therefore, in order to understand what Cavell is driving at in *The World Viewed*, we must bring to the fore some moments of the classical realist discourse surrounding the advent of cinema, a discourse summed up by Bazin's contention that by the "power of photography, the natural image of a world that we neither know nor can see, nature at last does more than imitate art: she imitates the artist." [Braudy 99: 199]

Crucially, as we have indicated, the cinema was seen by some of its more messianic proponents as heralding a new and more authentic relationship between man and world. In keeping with

this, as Martin Jay relates, for Bazin “the tyranny of Cartesian perspectivalism, which dominated Western painting, was lifted as the picture frame, separating subject and object, was replaced by the movie screen, helping to bring them once again together.” [Jay 94: 459] In other words, to Bazin the cinema figures – or even constitutes – a *reconciliation* of man and world, or, in the words of Kracauer, film effects a “redemption” of physical reality. This almost eschatological event – where man comes to see the world clearly, no longer in a mirror darkly – is emblemized for Bazin by the myth of the “total” cinema. This notion was elaborated in Bazin’s legendary collection of essays on film, *What is Cinema?*, published in four volumes from 1958 to 1962. “The guiding myth” Bazin writes in a seminal text,

...inspiring the invention of the cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time. [Braudy 99: 202]

In the case of Bazin this guiding myth becomes expressive of what amounts almost to a mystical experience of communion with the world.⁵³ Therefore, Jay comments, although he “called the dream of total cinema an idealist myth of perfect representation, Bazin nonetheless expressed evident wonder at the ontological power of the filmed image ... Whereas in the theatre, he argued, we share a reciprocally self-conscious awareness with the performers on the stage, ‘the opposite is true of the cinema. Alone, hidden in a dark room, we watch through half-open blinds a spectacle that is unaware of our existence and which is part of the universe. There is nothing to prevent us from identifying ourselves in imagination with the moving world before us, which becomes the world.’” [Jay 94: 460]

How does this precedent, which he willingly acknowledges, affect Cavell’s understanding of film? According to my reading, the strategy of Cavell’s *The World Viewed* is to perform a hermeneutics upon the utopian longings embodied in this conception of cinema and the act of viewing, what Cavell calls the wish for the condition of viewing as such. And, even more, in a dialectical turn *The World Viewed* becomes a hermeneutics of how this wish is treated self-reflectively *by cinema itself*.

⁵³ Literally, to Bazin, a re-creation of God’s creation of the world at every instant, i.e., in every frame.

The magic of cinema: Film, modernity and the condition of invisibility

As we have indicated, with some simplification one could say that *The World Viewed* is a cross-breeding of Heidegger's critique of objectivist representationalism with André Bazin's myth of the total cinema, a myth which, as we have seen above, suggests that film offers us a laying bare of, and therefore reconciliation with, the things. You could call it a *revelation* of the physical world, which is at the same time a *redemption* of it. A redemption, as it turns out, through love. Love not of something *in* the world, but love for the world itself, the world as such; as Bazin writes in his essay on Italian neo-realism: "In the world of cinema one must have the love of a De Sica for creation itself." [Braudy 99: 211] Accordingly, in a lyrical passage from 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', Bazin contends that:

The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. [Braudy 99: 199]

Regarded in this utopian manner, film, as Cavell writes, seems to promise "the exhibition of the world in itself" [Cavell 79: 119] Rather than straightforwardly accepting or rejecting this thesis, Cavell's dialectical strategy is to pit Bazin and Heidegger's approaches against each other, in effect asking if such a direct access to the unvarnished *objectivity* of things would not ultimately impair (what I would call) their *substantiality*. By substantiality I mean, in a Heideggerian-Cavellian fashion, the thingliness of the things *as* revealed by our "attunement" to them. Indeed, this potentially more critical approach to film fits neatly into a historical narrative where the modern crisis of intelligibility is understood in terms of a trading of our substantial *participation* in the world for the epistemically "objective" position of the spectator. Thus we trade the world for a representation of it, or rather, make the world into a picture. That is, in the words of Heidegger's 'The Age of the World Picture',

...the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age" [Heidegger 77: 130].

The general idea, if we are to follow Heidegger, guiding modern representationalism being that if we have an exact *picture* of the world, then we have the world itself. Hence the search for ever more precise modes of representation – more objective media if you will – is imbued with an almost eschatological spirit, aiming at the satisfaction of the wish for the world as such. Consequently, writes Cavell in *The World Viewed*: “So far as photography satisfied a wish, it satisfied a wish not confined to painters, but to the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation – a wish for the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another.” [Cavell 79: 21] Therefore, explicitly bringing Heideggerian phraseology into action, Cavell reflects that

When I learned of an essay of Heidegger’s called ‘The Age of the World View,’ the mere words suggested to me, from my knowledge of *Being and Time*, a range of issues – that ours is an age in which our philosophical grasp of the world fails to reach beyond our taking and holding views of it, and we call these views metaphysics ... I of course want the sense of *Weltanschauung* in my title, and though I felt it arise naturally in the way I was thinking about film, I was helped to it by my awareness of Heidegger’s. [Cavell 79: xxiii]

The notion of a “world view” suggests to Cavell not only something crucial about modernity, but also about the position of cinema in modern culture. The common denominator between the two being conditions of viewing, anonymity and objectivity. In keeping with this, the thought-figure controlling Cavell’s analysis in *The World Viewed* is that a spectator which views a photographically “projected” object has as it were become *invisible* to it. In other words to Cavell, film, like modernity, is marked by the fundamental asymmetry of the viewer and the viewed, subject and object.

This diagnosis points to the connection between *The World Viewed* and Cavell’s overarching philosophical concerns. In terms of Cavell’s understanding of skepticism, cinema figures the skeptical fantasy of “necessary inexpressiveness”, where the subject remains entirely inexpressive or *mute*, while the object stands totally revealed. Hence cinematic realism, or rather its “myth”, assuages about the skeptic’s anxiety regarding his responsibility for making himself known, as well as his anxiety regarding the conditions of possibility for knowing the object. In the myth of the total cinema both sides of this dilemma are taken care of *automatically*: Automatically there is no need for the subject to reveal itself (because it is not possible anyway), at the same time as the object *is* automatically revealed, unable to hide itself.

Hence the myth of the total cinema, in Cavell's interpretation, implicitly figures the skeptical fantasies of the modern subject, which is what makes cinema to him such a philosophically significant art-form, or cultural phenomenon.

In sum: The peculiar transparency of the cinematic viewing position, as we saw above, was remarked upon by Bazin himself, but Cavell, subjecting it to a dialectical turn, gives it a totally different interpretation. In *this* interpretation cinema does not effect reconciliation between man and world, but radically calls their unity into question. The ingenious twist of *The World Viewed* is thus to transform the Bazinian myth of total cinema into the story of the Invisible Man, or more specifically, into the ancient myth of the Ring of Gyges (recounted in the *Republic*), which Cavell takes to be symptomatic of the magical beginnings of cinema: The wish to view the world unseen. Cavell himself sums up his reinterpretation of the myth of the total cinema in terms of the (Gygian) myth of invisibility as follows: "What is cinema's way of satisfying the myth? Automatically we said. But what does that mean – mean mythically as it were? It means satisfying it without my having to do anything, satisfied by wishing. In a word, magically. I have found myself asking: How could film be art, since all the major arts arise in some way out of religion? Now I can answer: Because movies arise out of magic". [Cavell 79: 39] And a little further along he concludes:

How does movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen.
[Cavell 79: 40]

In other words, film affords us the opportunity to experience the world as if we were invisible to it. And, as the ring of Gyges, this turns out to be a mixed blessing – you might even call it tragic. Indeed, in terms of what we in the previous chapter called Cavell's "modern" understanding, we could say that the tragic drama figured by cinema (like that of Gyges) could be understood as a tragedy relating to the release from responsibilities (by becoming invisible, thus unaccountable to one's fellows), i.e. relating to what we called the tragedy of *excess of freedom*. Consequently, in the logic of Cavell, the task of serious film, and film-criticism, then becomes to explore and interpret the tragedy of freedom, as it pertains to the constellation of the viewer and the viewed, so emblematic of the human condition, especially as it unfolds in modernity.

The self who wasn't there

The grammar of cinematic realism

Cavell initiates his analysis of the medium of film – or rather photography – by comparing recordings of sounds with visual recordings. In the second chapter of *The World Viewed*, titled ‘Sights and Sounds’, Cavell poses the question: “Is the difference between auditory and visual transcription a function of the fact that we are fully accustomed to hearing things that are invisible, not present to us, not present with us?” [Cavell 79: 18] He then goes on to muse that we

...would be in trouble if we weren't so accustomed, because it is the nature of hearing that what is heard comes from someplace, whereas what you can see you can look at. It is why sounds are warnings, or calls; it is why a man can be spoken to by God and survive, but not if he sees God, in which case he is no longer in this world. Whereas we are not accustomed to seeing things that are invisible, or not present to us, not present with us; or we are not accustomed to acknowledging that we do (except for dreams). Yet this seems, ontologically, to be what is happening when we look at a photograph: we see things that are not present. [Cavell 79: 18]

These considerations, according to Cavell, point to a fundamental difference between sights and sounds, and therefore between auditory and visual recording: Sounds can be separated from their source in a different manner than visual impressions from theirs – the objects the visual impressions are *of*. Cavell's initial conclusion is that if the “sense data of photography were the same as the sense-data of the objects they contain, we couldn't tell a photograph of an object from the object itself.” [Cavell 79: 20] This is closely related to noting that “objects don't make sights, or have sights ... Objects are too *close* to their sights to give them up for reproducing; in order to reproduce the sights they (as it were) make, you have to reproduce *them* – make a mold, or take an impression.” [Cavell 79: 20] Indeed, the latter – the idea of film as a mold – is one that Bazin makes some reference to in *What is Cinema?* However, unsatisfied with it, Cavell attempts another tack:

Photographs are not hand-made; they are manufactured. And what is manufactured is an image of the world. The inescapable fact of mechanism or automatism in the making of these images is the feature

Bazin points to as ‘[satisfying], once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.’

What one likes to think (in the myth of the total cinema) that cinema is able to do is not to produce a visual *mold* of the object (as a phonographic record might be regarded as a mold of sound) – one likes to think that it is able to make *present* the object as such. To make it present so that one can see it for oneself. This, according to Cavell, is what defines what we could call the *grammar* of film, or more precisely, the grammar of cinematic realism. Film “projects” a world, presenting it *as if* it was present to us. This is of course not the same as to say that film actually makes the things present – but grammatically speaking cinematic realism *does* strive for the illusion, the as-if, of direct presence. In keeping with this Cavell *defines* photographically realistic film – the one he takes to be characteristic of the cinematic art that interests him – as an automatic mechanism that presents us with a series of “world-projections.” The result is that “in any film, however unpromising, some moment of interest, even beauty, is likely to appear. That is what the camera, left to itself, is like: the objects it manufactures have for us the same natural interest, or fascination, or boredom, or nothing, or poignance, or terror, as the world itself.” [Cavell 79: 104] But by the same token, and this is the crux, Cavell holds that film

...takes our very distance and powerlessness over the world as the condition of the world’s natural appearance. [Cavell 79: 119]

Inherently – you could say grammatically – cinematic realism exhibits a world in which the audience does not participate actively, which also absolves the members of the audience of responsibility regarding their capacities for knowing and acting.

Frustrated expectations

The denuded object and the wish for intimacy

In nuce, it is the cinematic enactment of this wish or obsession for assurance, this yearning for objective visual *verification* of the state of things (which at the same time excludes the viewer from the scene viewed) Cavell fastens on in his attempt to unlock the philosophical significance of film. It is a wish that before film and photography was characteristic of realistic painting, although, as we shall see below, not in exactly the same manner. To wit, Cavell maintains that the obsession with realism is not limited to modern media, nor to painters and

other artists; it expresses a human wish, an existential wish. It is in terms of this wish that film, as a medium, must be understood.

According to Cavell the issue of making the world present, or us present to it, is a crux of human existence. Moreover, on his view, this need escalates to an outright crisis with modernity and its yearning for an all-comprehensive view of the world, the revelation of things hidden since the foundation of the world. And here arises the irony or aporia that is defining not only for modernity, but also for the medium of film: The very desire to make the object wholly present through objectification (i.e. the elimination of subjective interference, such as painterly stylization) creates the ontological split that alienates subject from object. Consequently, argues Cavell: “At some point, the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation.” [Cavell 79: 22] Therefore one could surmise that in

...viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an expression of modern privacy or anonymity. It is as though the world’s projection explains our forms of unknownness and of our ability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear our natural condition. [Cavell 79: 40]

Consequently, the aporia of modernity, and of cinema, is condensed in the fact that “Photography overcame subjectivity in a way undreamed of by painting, a way that could not satisfy painting, one which does not so much defeat the act of painting as escape it altogether; by automatism, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.” That is, “Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past.” [Cavell 79: 23] Thus that the cinematic world is irrevocably “passing us by” is the price we pay for its appearing as entirely “objective” to us.

The one-way realism of film (which makes its world a “past” one, a world we cannot change) is illustrated by the following example. Cavell draws a distinction between a nude (as a stylized genre of painting) and an undressed person, which is as it were *natural*. “A nude is fine

enough” he says, “but to be undressed is something else, and it does require a reason”. I.e. while the nude posture in a traditional painting is blatantly conventional, without pretense to absolute realism (the nude acknowledges the spectator as such, the theatrical situation it is involved in), the appearance of a naked person in a film seems to require some kind of “realistic”, rather than conventional, explanation. That the cinematic audience *wants* to see a naked person is not reason good enough; or rather, that this is the reason cannot be acknowledged in cinematic realism; the film must pretend that there is another, objective reason, absolving the audience of its responsibility for its subjective desires. In other words, despite the fact that the naked person (typically a woman) in the film is placed there for the benefit of the viewer, the illusion of naturalness, that she is there on her own accord (and the camera only accidentally), going about her everyday life, must be rigorously maintained. The grammar of realist film demands that she must appear as if *objectively* present, without reference to the subjective desires of the viewer or the conventions of his or her society. Therefore, Cavell continues,

...in seeing a film of a desirable woman we are looking for a [natural] reason [for her to undress]. When to this we join our ontological status – invisibility – it is inevitable that we should expect to find a reason, to be around when a reason and an occasion present themselves, no matter how consistently our expectancy is frustrated. The ontological conditions of the motion picture reveals itself as inherently pornographic (though not of course inveterate). The million times in which a shot ended the instant the zipper completed the course down the back of a dress, or in which the lady stepped behind the shower door exactly as her robe fell, or in which a piece of clothing fell into the view of a paralyzed camera – these were not sudden enticements or pornographic asides, they were satisfactions, however partial, of an inescapable demand. [Cavell 79: 45]

The demand for what? The grammatical demand that what we are seeing is (as if) *real*, rather than staged. The paradox is that the more we, through the grammar of cinematic realism, seek the closest possible *intimacy* – the intimacy of nudeness – with the object in front of the camera, the more our ultimate separateness from it is revealed. The realism itself underscores our position as a viewer, with all the limitations and possibilities it entails. And a fortiori it reveals the skeptical aporia of modern man in search of an objective view of the world. Consequently, to say that “we wish to view the world itself” maintains Cavell, “is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become

one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look out at it, from behind the self.” [Cavell 79: 102]

In other words, in cinematic realism as in Cartesianism, the “route to conviction in reality [is] through the acknowledgement of the endless presence of self.” [Cavell 79: 22] Something is real because it can be seen by *us*. But this poses the problem: If something is real in virtue of being observable, how can our own selves be real when they have become invisible to the world? Hence the enchanted kingdom we view on screen seems real enough; what seems unreal, or exiled to the margin of reality, is our own self. The consequence is that instead of a Bazinian reconciliation, we experience a further rift between the world and our “inner” self, which now, frozen in a viewing position, is haunted by fantasies of action and domination. Indeed, as Cavell puts it

...it is our fantasies, now all but thwarted and out of hand, which are unseen and must be kept unseen. [Cavell 79: 102]

In conclusion, cinema makes the world (as if) present to us, without making us (as if) present to it. The result is that the world emerges as untouchable, impervious to our actions; hence it is as if the immanent world has become transcendent to us, beyond us, or as Cavell puts it, as if it has become a “world past.” Hence the basic “ontology” of film (its world-projections) comes to figure as much alienation as reconciliation – a precarious constellation which is exactly what draws Cavell’s philosophical attention to the cultural phenomenon of cinema.

Thus contra Bazin it is not (I take Cavell to be showing us) as if cinema has finally achieved what every other art-form has unsuccessfully strived for. As it turns out, the irony of history has subverted our utopian hopes for cinema, as it arguably has our utopian hopes for science, that other modern paragon of objectivity. Neither film nor science, in their efforts to give us the world “unmediated” by subjective distortion, has managed to reconcile us with our world; they have not “redeemed” (in Kracauer’s term) the immanent, physical realm – they have merely put that need for redemption into sharper relief, consistently frustrating our expectations of ecstatically embracing the denuded object, finally at home. This suggests that we should have another look at cinema’s relation to the traditional visual arts, and their modernist development.

Responses to theatricality: Photography and modernist painting

Given that photography once was imagined as a way of overcoming the realistic limitations of painting, the aporetic situation of cinema suggested by Cavell motivates a closer comparison between photographic and painterly techniques or “automatisms” in terms of their ability to resolve the problem of “presentness”, of bringing the subject and the object together. And not merely in regard to classical painting; *modernist* painting is now brought significantly into question. Indeed, film and modernist painting are perceived by Cavell as two complementary, diverging responses to the modern crisis of intelligibility, which to him *is* a crisis of presentness, or if you want, of substantiality. They are both attempting to effect the reconciliation that classical, pictorial painting no longer can, or perhaps never could, provide us with. In an even wider sense we could say that film and modernist painting is continuing the process of secularization where art attempts to take over the spiritual functions of religion, understood as communion with the cosmic whole. In that perspective there is no wonder that the champions of cinema (like Bazin) or of modernist painting (like Greenberg) do express their views with an almost messianic fervor, as well as with religious terminology. As Michael Fried puts it at the end of ‘Art and Objecthood’: “Presentness is grace.” Thus Cavell is hardly alone in his rhetoric when he writes in *The World Viewed* that

Painting, being art, is revelation; it is revelation because it is acknowledgment; being acknowledgment, it is knowledge, of itself and of its world. [Cavell 79: 110]

Historically, we could frame the issue like this (and I spend some time on this to flesh out Cavell’s rather sparse account in *The World Viewed*): In a pre-modern paradigm the problem of presentness was resolved in terms of a sympathetic notion of *participation*.⁵⁴ Namely, in a magical-ontological way one regarded the work of art (say a sculpture) as participating in what it represented (say a deity.) I.e., as in Heidegger’s description of the Greek temple-cult, the god

⁵⁴ The following is not only an interpretation of Cavell’s line of reasoning in *The World Viewed*, but accords with the general features of the way of thinking about the history of art that can be attributed to E. Panofsky and his followers. Cf. for instance Panofsky’s *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*. Cp. also Gombrich’s classic *The Story of Art*.

is present in the statue. This fostered an attitude where the “conventions” of art were regarded as not “merely” conventional, but as carrying “mimetic” affinity to what they represented. This notion of mimetic affinity, considered within an enchanted world-mythos (rather than a world-*picture*), circumscribing and circumscribed by traditional forms of life, sidestepped the need for representational realism (objectivity) in the modern sense. For instance, as late as to medieval artists the “unnatural” flatness of their images did not impair the ability to participate in the holy world-order the paintings appeared within. It was enough that the paintings were integrated into the cultic aspects of the current forms of life. *That*, rather than any intrinsic visual likeness to the “object”, was the source of the convincingness of say, iconic art. Hence the super-human or supra-human cosmic order was what in the end backed up the “presentness” of the represented object in pre-modern art, not some imperfect attempt at photographic verisimilitude. Indeed, in the words of Panofsky’s *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*:

The ancient Near East, classical antiquity, the Middle Ages and indeed any archaizing art (for example Botticelli) all more or less completely *rejected* perspective, for it seemed to introduce an individualistic and accidental factor into an extra- or supersubjective world. [Panofsky 02: 71, my italic]

Panofsky’s argument is that these cultures eschewed perspective for ontological reasons, rather than out of lacking technical ability. However, when, in the process of modernization, conviction in this world-order eroded (along with the concomitant traditional forms of life) the associated artistic conventions came to seem *merely* conventional, and, ultimately, “unrealistic” or false – literally false idols.⁵⁵ Hence the need for realistic representations in the *modern* sense can be seen as a function of the erosion of conviction in pre-modern forms of life and thought brought on by the reformation, the scientific revolution, the rise of capitalism, and so forth.

The new techniques of perspective in painting (themselves of a scientific origin) naturally – and increasingly – spoke to the growing need for “realism”, and became central to the rise of modern culture, including its epistemology and ontology. Yet as time wore on, and perspectivalism perfected itself in the academic art of the 19th century, this form of representation itself came to seem “merely” conventional or “inauthentic”, in the sense that it appeared, at least to some, contrived, artificial or *theatrical*. Hence the pictorial “poses” (cf. the

⁵⁵ Correspondingly iconoclasm, in every conceivable form, was a deeply ingrained feature of the process of modernization.

nudes alluded to by Cavell) came to be perceived as an obstacle to apprehending the world in its presentness and substantiality, its *realness*. Indeed, painterly realism itself appeared to be a false idol. Thus began the road to a non-perspectival art of *modern* painting.

But thus also, in the rise of photography, began the road to *cinematic* realism, as something consciously opposed to painterly realism. Noting this complementarity, E. H. Gombrich comments in *The Story of Art* that the development of painting at the end of the academic era might not have “been so quick and so thorough had it not been for two allies which helped people of the nineteenth century to see the world with new eyes.” [Gombrich 95: 523] These allies were, according to Gombrich, photography and the inspiration of Japanese art. About the former, Gombrich says that the “development of the portable camera, and of the snapshot, began during the same years which also saw the rise of impressionist painting. The camera helped to discover the charm of the fortuitous view and of the unexpected angle.” [Gombrich 95: 524] On the other hand, he notes that the invention of photography “was bound to push artists further on their way of exploration and experiment. There was no need for painting to perform a task which a mechanical device could perform better and more cheaply.” In other words, at the onset of modernism painters and photographers both borrowed from each other, *and* sought ways to differentiate themselves from what had now become their ontological opposite.

If we accept this narrative, we could surmise, like Cavell, that photography and modernist art both attempted to *overcome the theatricality of academic painting* (as well as the theatricality of the theater itself), though through increasingly opposed strategies. This was indeed a view that was put forward by Micheal Fried in ‘Art and Objecthood’, where he positioned cinema’s “escape” from theatricality vis-à-vis modernist painting’s attempt to “overcome” it. In his seminal essay Fried writes that there is “one art” that

...by its very nature, escapes theater entirely – the movies ... Because cinema escapes theater – automatically, as it were – it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality. At the same time, the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge – more accurately, the fact that what is provided is a refuge from theater and not a triumph over it, absorption not conviction – means that the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art. [Fried 98: 164]

According to this kind of analysis, photography and cinema sought to overcome the residual conventionalism of perspectival painting by creating a form of “super-image” that as it were *effaced* its own character of representation, and instead presented itself *as if* making the things themselves “automatically” present. (“Manufacturing” them as Cavell puts it.) This invited the new, more rigorously “realistic” grammar of photography and cinema, culminating in the so-called Hollywood Paradigm of synchronous sound and continuity editing, converging on Bazin’s “integral realism.” Modernist painting, on the other hand, foreswore realism altogether, focusing its efforts not on the depiction of things in their substantial presentness, but on the substantiality (or presentness) of the paintings themselves. Paint and canvas, in what Cavell calls “characteristic applications”, itself *became* the substance of painting, figuring, in a non-figurative way, the substance of the world.

Hence in painting the modernist solution to the problem of presentness proved, in the creation of increasingly non-figurative works, to hinge on the notion (foreshadowed by Kant) that the substantiality of the world should be explored through the free shaping of worldly materials, rather than in the attempt to directly represent persons, things, events, etc. Indeed, as we found in Chapter 6, the painters decided that in order to continue painting, they would have to jettison its realist conventions. Only in that way could they remain true to the *tradition* of painting, as embodied in the exemplary achievements of the past. Accordingly, a new notion of continuity with the past was invented with modernist art, as evidenced by the writings of Clement Greenberg. Which is to say that along with modernist painting and its criticism, there ascended a new mode of art *historiography* that did not interpret the history of art primarily in terms of unfulfilled realist intentions.⁵⁶ Thus, as Panofsky suggests in the quote above, in this historical perspective the rejection of perspectivalism in modernist painting was hardly something novel. To the contrary, the insistence on realism in painting could now be regarded as a rather brief interlude in the history of art, and, by the same token, the turn to non-realistic painting could be seen as return to painting’s “real” concerns.

Consequently, taking his cue from such considerations, Cavell is trying in *The World Viewed* to separate film and painting “ontologically”. Indeed, the realization of the diverging historical paths of painting and photography, as sketched out above, leads Cavell to the principle that

⁵⁶ A mode of interpretation that was foreshadowed not only Kant’s but also by Hegel’s aesthetics.

photography (and hence film) is *of* a world, while a painting *is* a world. He expresses it as follows, trying to get to grips with

...the specific sense in which photographs are of the world, of reality as a whole. You can always ask, pointing to an object in a photograph – a building say – what lies behind it, totally obscured by it. This only accidentally makes sense when asked of an object in a painting. You can always ask, of an area photographed, what lies adjacent to that area, beyond the frame. [Cavell 79: 23]

You can pose these questions, says Cavell, because they have answers in reality. The same is not the case, in general, with painting. This is so because the “world of a painting is not continuous with the world of its frame; at its frame, a world finds its limits. We might say: A painting is a world, a photograph is of the world.” The photograph is inherently cropped, ultimately by the camera itself, which has a limited angle of view. And what happens is that when a photograph “is cropped, the rest of the world is cut out.” The conclusion is that the “implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection, are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents.” [Cavell 79: 24]

That is one part of the argument. Next, if you regard the projection of the film instead of its exposure to objects, you notice that the screen onto which the film is projected is “not a support, not like a canvas”. What is it then? Here Cavell makes a clever play on words: a screen might also be construed as a *barrier*, a screen against something. And this is exactly what he does, asking what the silver screen screens us from. Answering: “It screens me from the world it holds – that is, makes me invisible.” [Cavell 79: 24] The screen, concludes Cavell, “screens the world from me – that is, it screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality.” Summarizing, we might say that:

I am invisible to the world in the film, but not to the world that painting is, and to the world I inhabit together with the painting.

This is the “ontological” difference between film and painting, on Cavell’s view, the difference that is acknowledged by painterly modernism’s eschewal of the conventions of realism.

The stars down to earth

The cinematic double

The upshot of Cavell's analysis is that film, as a series of "world-projections", permits us to view *a* world, but it is not exactly *our* world, the world that we share with say a painting. To use a Heideggerian term, it is not a world that we have *appropriated* (made ours) by our own substantial agency. Or to put it in a more Cavellian mode: It is not a world that we implicitly acknowledge through the ubiquitous interactions of our everyday life. We do not have a "diurnal" relation to it, inhabiting it day and night, day after day. In short, it is not a world in which we *participate*, in which we *live*. Rather it is some kind of parallel universe, a simulacrum, infinitesimally and infinitely distant from our own. In short, it is our double. Elaborating this line of thought, Cavell writes that

The depth of automatism of photography is to be read not alone in its mechanical production of an image of reality, but in its mechanical defeat of our presence to that reality. The audience in a theatre can be defined as those to whom the actors are present while they are not present to the actors. But movies allow the audience to be mechanically absent. The fact that I am invisible and inaudible to the actors, and fixed in position, no longer needs accounting for; it is not part of a convention I have to comply with; the proceedings do not have to make good the fact that I do nothing in the face of tragedy, or that I laugh at the folly of others. [Cavell 79: 26]

Cavell invokes this motif in his discussion of the Hollywood star-system, describing how the "stars" occupy some kind of parallel universe to our own, a universe which, like the starry heaven, can only be observed from afar, "divining our projects." That is, remarking on the difference between a stage-actor (depending on heavily stylized stage-conventions, conventions which allows, for instance, a man to play a woman) and a screen-personality exploiting (and submitting to) the grammatical "realism" of the camera, Cavell notes that:

Humphrey Bogart was both an accomplished actor and a vivid subject for the camera. Some people are, just as some people are both good pitchers and good hitters; but there are so few that it is surprising that the word 'actor' keeps on being used in place of the more beautiful and more accurate word 'star'; the stars are only to gaze at, after the fact, and their actions divine our projects. [Cavell 79: 29]

Consequently we must recognize, argues Cavell, “the sense in which the creation of a (screen) performer is also the creation of a character – not the kind of character an author creates, but the kind that certain real people are: a type.” [Cavell 79: 29] An individual type, yes, almost like a real *person*, but one occupying a parallel world to ours. It is in this sense that the Bogart-character does not inhabit *our* universe, but the Bogart-universe. In other words, the world of Bogart is both infinitely close and infinitely far away from our everyday lives. His world is, to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare, a world subtly and irrevocably out of joint with our own. And this lack of a substantial *joining* (call it marriage, or friendship, or simply *community*) of our world and the world on film is what reintroduces, in an unexpected way, the modern aporias associated with, on the one hand, perspectival-theatrical conventions, and on the other, technical-scientific abstractions. In short, even as cinema attempts to eschew merely conventional representation in the name of an “integral” realism, it ends up with substituting an *objective* world for our everyday *substantial* one, with the corresponding sense of uncanniness, melancholy and alienation: the ghost of a world, a *Doppelgänger*.

Accordingly, in its attempt to outbid theatricality, cinema inadvertently raises its stakes, creating a new form of theatricality, cinematic theatricality. The cinematic “scene” is no longer a conventionally circumscribed subspace of our everyday world, it constitutes a wholly different space – and a wholly different *kind* of space. And what kind of creature, what kind of *simulacrum*, so like and so unlike ourselves, inhabits that space is hard to specify. Because it is, says Cavell of the film-screen

...an incontestable fact that in a motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human something is, and something unlike anything else we know. We can stick to our plain description of that human something as ‘in our presence while we are not in his’ (present at him, because looking at him, but not present to him) and still account for the difference between his live presence and his photographed presence to us. We need to consider what is present, or, rather, since the topic is the human being, who is present. [Cavell 79: 27]

Thus rather than overcoming theatricality from within – which is the aim of modernist theatre (the name of Artaud comes to mind), questioning conventions about realistic narrative, the

invisible status of the spectator, etc. – cinema creates a form of stage-division where the distance between actor and audience is as it were ontologically assured by mechanical means.⁵⁷

It is in this perspective we can re-appreciate the significance of modernism in the traditional visual arts. Modernist painting and sculpture deliberately chooses the opposite path of cinema: It *eschews* objectivity in order to celebrate untheatrical substantiality. “What painting wanted,” says Cavell, “in wanting connection with reality, was a sense of *presentness* – not exactly a conviction of the world’s presence to us, but of our presence to it.” [Cavell 79: 22] As we have suggested, photographic realism was hardly the goal of painting from the start. Indeed, even in its most realistic phases painting has been guided by considerable idealization and stylization. Consequently, in disowning certain painterly conventions of realism, modernist painting is still (or even more) *painterly* – as opposed to photographic. Modernist painting, like the most ancient one, focuses not on “realistic” representational categories, but on our polymorphous *attunement* to the things of the world. Thus another way of defining the ambition of modernist painting and sculpture would be to say that it does *not* want to be a “double” of the world. This is the deeper motivation for its sacrifice of realistic representation.

The aporia of modernist painting, revisited

Yet, as we saw in Chapter 6, this strategy of painterly withdrawal from representation is not without problems of its own. By rigorously eschewing representation (and thus narrative and symbolism) high modernist painting retreats to a marginal sphere of pure aesthetics, unable to fill the traditional, public functions of art, functions that, however haltingly, cinema still attempts to respond to. Namely, the attunement that modernist painting of the abstract expressionist type appeals to is a strictly formal-aesthetical one, and thus void of the conceptual content that informed earlier periods when paintings were regarded as partaking of concrete, and detailed, life-projects. (This goes for classical as well as pre-modern art.) Meaning, as J. M. Bernstein argues in *The Fate of Art*, that the specific way in which modernist painting appeals to purely *aesthetic* sensibility merely shows how precarious attunement has become in a modern culture that struggles with defining a substantial “common sense.” Which is another way of saying that the modernist retreat from representation, from *saying* something, is a figuration of the modern crisis of intelligibility. Painting has as it were become “mute”, like

⁵⁷ For the theme of modernist theatre, cf. Cavell’s treatment of Becket in ‘Ending the Waiting Game.’ [Cavell 94]

the subject at a loss for words, a muteness that becomes emblematic in the blank canvas which to commentators like Bernstein spells the potential “end” of art.

In short, on Bernstein’s view, the formalism of modernist aesthetics becomes emblematic of a lack of community (or in the Tönnies-language, *Gemeinschaft*) in modern civilization (*Gesellschaft*), reflecting the formalism of our legalistic procedures and “truth-only” cognition. Thus, as we remarked in Chapter 6, rather than a solution to the crisis of modernity, modernist art becomes an, at times highly self-conscious, enactment of it. And this of course is what affords modernist art (in its very alienation) such a central, or exemplary, position within cultural modernism as such. Indeed, as it is often thought, in conspicuous opposition to the commercial populism of the “mass medium” of film, completely oblivious to the aporias of modernity.

The question then arises: Can cinema, in order to become less “naïve” in a cultural modernist perspective, perform a similar dialectical maneuver? Can it somehow turn self-reflectively upon itself in order to examine its position within modernity in a medium-specific way? Can there, in short, be a modernist cinema? And, notably, one that does not strip cinema of its grammatical “realism”, which is what Cavell after all – basically agreeing with Bazin – thinks is what makes film what it is? This I take to be the ultimate question of *The World Viewed*.

Modernism in film?

Cavellian “voice” and the technique of asynchronous sound

In ‘Art and Objecthood’ Michael Fried contends that “cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art.” [Fried 98: 164] And the reason he submits for this, as we saw, is that cinema provides merely a *refuge* from the “war” between art and theatricality, and not an “overcoming” of it. Indeed, because of the “automatic, guaranteed character” of that refuge cinema is not even a real contender in that battle, a battle which to Fried defines what modernism is all about. Cavell, however, in *The World Viewed* seems to take a somewhat more flexible approach, at least implicitly. While cinema does not conform to his notion of an aesthetically based modernist art like painting, it might still be able take upon itself medium-specific, modernist issues. Indeed, in chapter ten of *The World Viewed* he explicitly affirms that within “the last decade film has been moving into the modernist environment inhabited for

generations by other major arts.” [Cavell 79: 60] Thus in the later parts of *The World Viewed* Cavell discusses more specifically various “automatisms” or techniques of film and how they can be set to work in order to develop the medium in what I take to be an essentially “autonomous” fashion. In particular, Cavell discusses how these techniques can be used to reflect on the character of the medium of film as such, in short, how these techniques can be used to immanently explore the question: What is film and what is its role in our current form of life?

One of the most promising techniques in this respect, Cavell finds, is that of *asynchronous sound*. He also mentions possibilities of color, slow-motion, zoom, etc., but I will focus on asynchronous sound, because I take it to acutely illustrate the connection between Cavell’s overall philosophical concerns and his concern for cinema. Namely, I think that we should relate Cavell’s interest in asynchronous sound to his interest in the human *voice*.⁵⁸ That is, I think Cavell lauds the use of asynchronous sound (when effectively employed, of course) because it figures the issue of the human voice and its place in the world, and how this pertains to the culture of cinema as such – which figures modern culture as such. Namely, what asynchronous sound figures, Cavell says, is the “reality of the unsayable”. Meaning that this technique offers a way of presenting the “speaker in forms in which there can be no speech.” [Cavell 79: 148] In other words, by pitting sound and image dialectically against each other, cinema is able to discuss the extent to which we are able to word our world – the ability of our voice to reach and to express the things of the world, its power to *articulate*. Which is another way of saying that it discusses the position of the self, with its voice, in the world; can it make itself present, “prove” or confirm its own existence? To itself? To others? To the world?

Another way of putting it would be to say that in a Cavellian perspective the notion of “synchronicity” is of interest in itself, it being in effect a modality of attunement or *agreement*. Remember Cavell’s contention in *The Claim of Reason* that agreement-qua-attunement means

...being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales [Cavell 99: 32].

⁵⁸ The focus on voice indicates that Cavell’s philosophy of film is related to his philosophy of opera, which we will not go into *per se*. As Cavell writes in *Philosophy the day after tomorrow*, “opera is the Western institution in which—beginning in the same decade as the composition of the great tragedies of Shakespeare—the human voice is given its fullest acknowledgment, generally in the course of showing that its highest forms of expression are apt not to be expressive enough to avoid catastrophe, especially for women.” [Cavell 05: 15] This connection is evident in his treatment of the “melodrama of the unknown woman.” (See below.)

The image of clocks naturally invokes the theme of synchronicity. Are we synchronous, that is “in time” with ourselves, each other, the world? Are we *present* with our voice when and where things happen (as opposed of appearing only belatedly, when the world is past)? Are we partaking in a greater conversation or *chorus*, each taking our turn, or are we merely marching to our own beat? Are we mute, silenced, secreted in a land of shadows, like darkness shrouds the cinematic audience. Is the sun, as C. S. Lewis puts it, always somewhere else?

Indeed, the inherent difficulties of synchronization of sound and images (which haunted sound-film for a protracted period) can in itself be regarded as emblematic of the difficulties of bringing our voice – our power of articulation – into synchronicity with the events of the world, with the unfolding of our lives. It eminently matches the problems of finding words that matches the world, is *attuned* to it. To wit, speech slowed “to match slow motion” notes Cavell,

...sinks into moan and grunt. Speeded human actions become the actions of machines, still intelligible; speech matched to them rises to blurts of twittering. You cannot flash a word into a phrase without altering the phrase; you cannot freeze a word without losing it. The tempo and progression of spoken intelligibility are inexorable. [Cavell 79: 149]

In short, synchronicity or the lack of it can be inflected into a cinematic language – a set of automatisms – fit to acknowledge the alienation that, in a sense, cinema itself embodies, the audience swathed in shadows, gazing mutely at a brilliantly illuminated world just beyond their reach. In consequence, the cinematic use of asynchronous sound addresses (if properly used) the separation of the viewer and the viewed which cinema relies on. Correspondingly, asynchronous sound affords cinema a technique with which it can discuss both itself and its place in our forms of life, and thereby, discuss the human condition in modern society.

Days of Heaven

Panorating over in silence that which we cannot speak about

An instructive, and fairly recent, example of what the asynchronous use of sound amounts to is offered in the Enlarged edition of *The World Viewed*. Here Cavell is discussing the film *Days*

of Heaven directed by Terence Malick.⁵⁹ Speaking of *Days of Heaven*, Cavell says that he assumes that anyone “who has taken an interest in the film wishes to understand what its extremities of beauty are in service of, and not just its extremities but successions of beauty.” [Cavell 79: xiv] After some deliberation, he suggests that we should attempt “expressing the subject as one in which the works and the emotions and the entanglements of human beings are at every moment reduced to insignificance by the casual rounds of earth and sky”. By this I take Cavell to allude to the minimization of action and dialogue in the film, Malick electing instead to panorate his camera over the vast Midwestern landscapes which makes men and their machines appear incidental, juxtaposing those overpowering images to the monological ramblings of his drifting protagonists, alienated as they are from both nature and society. (Not to say from their own selves, their own bodies, their own *destinies*.) Thus there is marked lack of synchronicity between what is said and what is shown in the film, and the land itself becomes the main protagonist. We could say that in *Days of Heaven* the landscape appears self-contained, the humans and their civilization a mere attribute of its timeless being. The accidentalness of human endeavors to this world-process (regarded *sub specie aeternitatis*) is what is figured in the asynchronicity between the human voices and the landscape, in the disembodied voices of the voice-over. Or alternatively, the asynchronicity of the voices mirrors our restlessness within this landscape, our failure to *dwell* in it, at peace between heaven and earth. The contrast between earthly tranquility and human restlessness is enhanced by the plethora of means of transportation and observation which features in the film, symbols of the ongoing industrial revolution in America, the conquest of her spaces: Trains, cars, motorcycles, steamboats, as well as microscopes and telescopes doubling the cinematic apparatus itself. It shows a mythical kingdom between presence and absence, this new, yet unapproachable America.

In relation to this, it seems only natural that Cavell quotes some passages from Heidegger’s ‘What is called thinking?’ culminating with a description of how “presence”

...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 illuminated, radiant self-manifestation. [Cavell 79: xv]

⁵⁹ Malick, an American, incidentally studied philosophy in Germany prior to his career as a director. He translated a text of Heidegger’s into English, *The Essence of Reasons*.

This fits well with how in *Days of Heaven* the mere self-manifestation of the landscape (the mere presence of the spirit of *America* one might say, whispering and brooding in the fields) upstages the conventional dialogue and action, leaving only room for disjointed, Faulkneresque soliloquy. Having noted that the very title of the movie reflects a Heideggerian theme – “call it the arena between earth (or days) and heaven” – Cavell concludes that 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-creating of themselves on film; they are essential in the making of their appearance. Objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins.” That sounds fairly Bazinian. But then comes the punch-line:

Their presence refer to their absence, their location in another place.
[Cavell 79: xvi]

Always another place, one might add, necessarily, ontologically; always in a land of light beyond these shadowy realms we inhabit. Hence Malick’s film – in an ingenuous twist of the Bazinian logic – becomes not so much about presence as *absence*. I.e. what the film *acknowledges* is not the here-and-now of this “beautiful country”, but its displacement, its inaccessibility to us; the utopian, ever-receding nature of that new, yet unapproachable America.

If I might be so bold, I would say that on this view the film – indeed film as such, with its projective geometry – is about the *horizon*: the line at infinity. It is about the *glow* on that horizon, the radiance suggesting a “next” world, a promised land beyond, one which draws away from us the closer we move to it. Thus in *Days of Heaven*, a world does manifest itself (a veritable Emersonian-Thoreauian garden of Eden) but *as* absent. That is, as “past”, as “lost”, but also, by the same token, as “yet to come.” As Cavell puts it another place in the book, what a modernist film, on this model, acknowledges is the absence of the *camera* (figuring the self or subject) from the world it is observing; it acknowledges the fact that we are standing outside, or on the margins, of this world, our voice inaudible to it. On this view one might venture that *Days of Heaven* – not to say (modernist) cinema as such – is about the *dialectics* of presence and absence, as well as of knowing and acknowledging.

Correspondingly, like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Malick's work fades out in a gesture of silence, acknowledging the reality of the unsayable.⁶⁰ And the image of Wittgenstein the recluse reminds us of Thoreau the recluse, both penning their to-be famous works away from the madding crowd, issuing a call to the rest of humanity from their self-fashioned abodes – and their self-fashioned exiles, their inventions of solitude – in the countryside. Indeed, when Cavell says that Malick has found a way “to transpose such thoughts for our meditation” he might as well be thinking of the tenets of New England Transcendentalism as those of Heidegger, and their moral perfectionist meditations on the conditions of possibility of joining men in a true community, dwelling authentically in the land. Which ultimately comes down to a meditation on the efficacy of language, our immanent voice, to house the human condition, to word our world, to find each other in days passing under heaven.

The reflection on the limits and possibilities of language (the voice) is, as made clear by *The Senses of Walden*, a meditation that Cavell associates jointly with Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Emerson/Thoreau. Now we can join that meditation to film as well, because, in a similar way as modernist art and philosophy, modernist cinema has to contend with its limitations, which also constitute its conditions of possibility. It, too, must contend with the condition that the luminescent things slip out of our grasp, our clutches – because the harder we grasp, the more they slip. This is, as Emerson-Cavell puts it, the “unhandsomeness” of our human condition. This gives us the bottom line of Cavell's ruminations on the work of Malick:

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 dominion over the world, or in aestheticizing it (temptations inherent in the making of film, or of any art), they are refusing their participation in it. [Cavell 79: xvi]

Days of Heaven demonstrating in a way that would have pleased Bazin, with long shots and depth of field, the very sensuous heights cinematic realism can attain to, at the same time indicates the paradoxes of cinema which Bazin tended to evade. What Malick's film does on Cavell's reading is in effect to reflect on the aporias of cinematic realism, which is what makes it reasonable to assess it as a modernist film. Uncannily, it shows that film's utopian promise of the world's exhibition merely is the “background against which it registers absolute isolation.” [Cavell 79: 159]

⁶⁰ ‘The Acknowledgment of Silence’ being the title of the final chapter of *The World Viewed*.

**Cinema, community and human relationships:
The significance of genre to Cavell's thought on film**

In summary of the above discussion, we could say that to Cavell the medium of film implicitly is “about” community and isolation, about kingdom and exile, and that to thematize this constellation cinematically *is* to thematize the medium of film itself. Above we have laid down some pointers to the understanding of how Cavell treats this issue in largely, but not solely, formal terms in *The World Viewed*. However, in that same book there are also suggestions about how the *stories* told on film, or their *genres*, themselves reflect on this problematic. We shall have a brief look at what this signifies, not the least in respect to the continuity with Cavell's other works on film.

I. Western

The valence of liberty

Central to the understanding of *The World View* is an appreciation of Cavell's discussion of how the Western genre (and its sub-genres) can be regarded as a meditation on liberty and society – specifically, the unity of the American nation taking shape in the “wild” West – and how this constellation of unity and division is in turn figured by the unity and division of the medium of film itself. For instance, Cavell writes about John Ford's classical Western, *The Man who shot Liberty Valence*, that

Liberty Valance is the fullest expression of the knowledge of the cost of civilization to be found in this genre of film, and therefore it is the greatest instance of it. (The valence of liberty: the power with which one man's freedom combines with, or shuns, the freedom of another.) In so fully opening the legend of the West, it ends it ... [Cavell 79: 58]

Cavell appears to detect an intrinsic relation between modern American life, the founding of the American nation in the “wild” West, the Western genre, and the ontology of film as such. It all comes down to this, I suggest: Can we know ourselves, each other, in this (new) world? Can we *make* ourselves known, express ourselves, and thus overcome our divisions? Can this society, this union of states, this marriage of man and landscape, and individuals with each other, be a happy one? Indeed, as Cavell says,

What Shane knows, as he rides back out of the valley, is only that *he* is not made for civilization, which he finally learned, as we did, when after his climactic duel he twirled his brilliant pistol (the whole screen looming it) back into its holster. His satisfaction pins him to his fate; he recognizes that he cannot forgo his mark of mastery, his taste for distinction, the privilege in his autonomy. [Cavell 79: 58]

Considering Shane's dilemma what will, in Heideggerian terms, be the *fate* of this union, this gathering of heaven and earth, men and mortals, this rite of passage under John Ford's "gorgeous, suspended skies"? It is as if Cavell senses an intrinsic affinity between the condition of cinema and the horizon of that vast land "dotted here and there with shelters".⁶¹ In consequence he seems to suggest that the medium of film, ontologically, is about *distance* and its overcoming, and what that means to us humans. Which is just another way of saying that film is about *participation*: participation in, say, a world, a society, a friendship, a marriage. In short, coming back to our discussion of *Days of Heaven*, cinema is the medium of the dialectics of distance and nearness, or if you will, the vicissitudes of presentness, of being-there or "Dasein". This bridge between cinematic modernism and the Western genre affords an important clue to the reading of Cavell's later books on film, *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*.

II. Remarriage

A republic of two

On the principles of interpretation I have introduced above, we could day say that in the genre that Cavell characterizes as the "Hollywood comedy of remarriage" the subject of divorce and reconciliation can be understood as reflecting how the viewer is "divorced" or "separated" from the world viewed on film, yet seeks to be "as one" with it. That is, the remarriage comedy, as described in *Pursuits of Happiness*, is on my interpretation about the drama of getting "back together" with the "better half", whether this "better half" is understood as a spouse or as the world (or thing) itself.⁶² In short, it is about the semi-eschatological subject of a "return", as it

⁶¹ Incidentally, *The World Viewed*, written in the Vietnam era, seems quite pessimistic in this respect. Alluding to the fate of the Indians in the West, Cavell concludes the chapter with the words, "So our slaughtered beauty mocks us, and gods become legends." This critical attitude to the history of his nation may be one reason that Cavell wished to take a modernist approach to film, cinema figuring as it does not only modernity but also Americanism.

⁶² Some comedies of remarriage:

The Awful Truth (1937), d. Leo McCarey (starring Cary Grant & Irene Dunne)

were a “second coming”. Thus, as Cavell puts it in ‘A Capra Moment’, a follow-up on *Pursuits of Happiness*:

The title ‘remarriage’ registers the grouping of a set of comedies which differ from classical comedy in various respects, but most notably in this: In classical comedy the narrative shows a young pair overcoming obstacles to their love and at the end achieving marriage, whereas comedies of remarriage begin or climax with a pair less young, getting or threatening their divorce, so that the drive of the narrative is to get them *back* together, together *again*.⁶³

Essentially, in comedy, especially one that ends with a (re)marriage, the utopian wish for reconciliation *is* symbolically granted (rather than endlessly deferred) by the happy ending, all tensions released in laughter. That is, the comedy of remarriage treats of a relationship in full or partial disintegration (the partners estranged from each other, no longer participating in a common project, no longer hearing the other’s voice), where, at the last instant, the divorce is forestalled or annulled, and the pair gets together again. In keeping with what we have discussed before, this whole problematic could (like tragic drama) be regarded in a “modern” light, namely treating it as one pertaining to the dangers of excessive freedom. In the words of Cavell:

The central idea is that the validity or bond of marriage is no longer assured or legitimized by church or state or sexual compatibility or children but by something I call the willingness for remarriage, a way of continuing to affirm the happiness of one's initial leap, as if the chance of happiness exists only when it seconds itself. In classical comedy people made for one another find one another; in remarriage comedy people who *have* found one another find that they *are* made for each other. The greatest of the structures of remarriage is *The Winter's Tale*, which is, together with *The Tempest*, the greatest of the Shakespearean romances.⁶⁴

Namely, in the comedy of remarriage we are faced with the danger of excessive freedom as figured by the constant possibility of divorce, which can only be countered by a constant overcoming of, say, the threat or temptation of separation, which again could be seen as a cipher for the modern threat or temptation of *skepticism*, of withdrawing to the “theatre of the

The Philadelphia Story (1940), d. George Cukor (starring Cary Grant & Katharine Hepburn)
His Girl Friday (1940), d. Howard Hawks (starring Cary Grant & Rosalind Russell)
That Uncertain Feeling (1942), d. Ernst Lubitsch (starring Melvyn Douglas & Merle Oberon)
The Lady Eve (1941), d. Preston Sturges (starring Barbara Stanwyck & Henry Fonda)

⁶³ Humanities, Vol. 6, No. 4 (August 1985), pp. 3-7.

⁶⁴ Humanities, Vol. 6, No. 4 (August 1985), pp. 3-7.

mind” (which of course can be read as a cipher for cinema itself). Hence in the comedy of remarriage the (re-)union of the couple must, qua modern, be *self-authorized*, independent of external authority. Hence the decision to remarry is also the couple’s declaration of independence. This effectively joins the comedy of remarriage to the implicitly political concerns of the Western discussed above. As I understand Cavell, the underlying logic of the genre is as follows: The “old” marriage, the one threatened by divorce, represents the traditional reasons for matrimony: theological, economical, biological, etc. If not a marriage of convenience, it has at least turned into one of convention, or conventionality. The dramatic “crisis” (which the dramaturgy of the genre is premised upon) is that this state of marriage has come to seem contrived or *theatrical*. It is no longer perceived as natural, as an unforced commitment. The course of the film then centers on finding other, less conventional (or less theatrical) legitimatizations of matrimony, reasons that are able to motivate a “new” marriage (a new covenant.) To put it in Biblical terms: The old covenant is founded on law, while the new covenant is founded on love. The question, which is one of moral perfectionism, then becomes: What *is* love? And according to Cavell, the crux is that there is no general definition of what love is (the law is bound by rules and formulas, love is not); the point being that every modern couple must for themselves decide what love is, something Cavell summarizes with an appeal to the Kantian notion of a “lawfulness without law.”

What drives the drama forward from the initial crisis is that in order for this lawfulness without law to come about, this intimate *attunement* that knows no rules (where two becomes “as one” without losing their individual voices, their Emersonian self-reliance), the couple must *educate* each other, which means that they must get to know the other person *and* learn to reveal themselves to that other person. Hence, in the terminology of our previous chapters, we might say that the remarriage comedies enact the successful progress of the Wittgensteinian “scene of instruction”. This implies, to Cavell, that the members of the couple *grow up* together, become grown-ups together (hence the process of remarriage might be termed an “education for grown-ups”); which also implies the rebirth, or creation, of a new woman and a new man, a new Adam and Eve if you will, joined under a new heaven on a new earth (free of “corruption”; the snubbing of societal dishonesty being a typical sub-plot of the genre), which shows that Cavell’s eschatological propensities again have found fertile ground. In terms of his leitmotifs, this implies that the members of the couple must overcome their skepticism, meaning their hang-ups on privacy and certainty: They must learn to *trust* in each other, and in

their own powers of expression and judgment. The complications inherent in this process, of course, is the stuff that makes the comedy of remarriage comical.

Specifically, since these films are early Hollywood “talkies”, the process of mutual education unfolds through incessant *conversation*, in the slapstick style. As in the piece of dialogue from *It Happened One Night* discussed by Cavell in ‘A Capra Moment’:

--What did you say we're supposed to be doing?

--Hitch-hiking.

--Oh. Well. You've given me a very good example of the hiking. Where does the hitching come in?

--Uh, a little early yet. No cars out.

--If it's just the same to you I'm going to sit right here and wait 'til they come.

Ultimately this kind of bantering, and apparently trivial conversation, as a mutual process of acknowledgement of self and other, proves to be the substance of marriage – the new, post-conventional marriage, which in the end is a figure for moral perfectionist friendship, which also is fraternity, which also is the republic, the kingdom of ends.

Crucially, the tit-for-tat dialogue between the protagonists of the remarriage comedies enacts the relation of *equality*, as a central theme in modernity, whether it be in the public or private sphere. Indeed, a discussion of the relation between Milton’s views on the rights to divorce and his views on the rights to political self-determination is central to Cavell’s thought on the remarriage comedy, converging on the idea that union should be voluntary. The perfectionist marriage *is*, so to say, a republic for two, free and independent, recognizing no other authority apart from that derived from the consensus of its own members. This is the utopian cast of the remarriage comedy. Correspondingly, says Cavell,

Our films may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgement (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the views each holds of the other. This gives the films of our genre a Utopian cast. They harbor a vision which they know cannot fully be domesticated, inhabited, in the world we know. They are

romances. Showing us our fantasies, they express the inner agenda of a nation that conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself.
[Cavell 81: 17-18]

Thus alas, just because they are utopian, Cavell admits that “our films” are “romances”. Their happy endings are confined to the silver screen, to the immaculate world of the cinematic double, the star come down to earth. (Which we, with *Walden*, and *The Senses of Walden*, could also call a “mourning star.”) For as history has shown us, love, freedom and equality are not easy to handle; they are dangerous gifts and frequently turn into their dialectical opposites, as the exhilaration of the French revolution turned into terror. Here resides what I regard as the underlying “dark” thrust of Cavell’s thought on the remarriage comedy, and his thought at large, which I have hinted at with the phrase “excessive freedom”. Specifically, in this particular context, we could say that the modern ideals of love, as well as the modern ideals of civic freedom, have provoked a spate of divorces, which in effect alienate men and women from each other. One even speaks of a general breakdown of the family, our basic unit of community. In other words, the uncompromising yearning for perfect communion precipitates isolation by undoing the compromises that has brought us together in the first place. Hence the cultural phenomenon of divorce figures how liberty may lead to alienation in modern mass society (the “lonely crowd”), which one could call one aspect of the dialectic of Enlightenment. Paradoxically, as many “critics of modernity” has pointed out, our modern ideals of love contribute towards our separation from each other, the disintegration of community, such as it is (or such as it was). This could be seen as parallel to how the modern medium of film, in its attempt to grasp the things themselves, in effect alienates us from them, by making us spectators to them, and by rendering irrelevant older ways of relating to the world and each other.

Thus a possible moral of our reading of the *Pursuits of Happiness* seems to be (rather than a simple-minded celebration of “free” love) that we risk losing the world because we want it too much, just as we risk losing love because we want love too much. Consequently, the modern phenomena of divorce and cinema mirror each other as clandestine agents of separation not only in the historical statistics, but also at an existential level, as twin indicators of a problem inherent in the dangerous gift of freedom itself, as emblemized by the stalemate between the viewer and the viewed. Thus while neither cinema nor divorce could be seen as the root-causes of modern alienation, they surely can be seen as symptoms of it. In view of this, it becomes possible to interpret the remarriage comedies, as a genre, as reflections on the ironies of

modern life, as jointly figured by divorce and cinema. Hence their humor is ultimately tinted with darkness. Indeed, we could recall a passage from *The World Viewed*:

In viewing films, the sense of invisibility is an expression of modern privacy or anonymity. It is as though the world's projection explains our forms of unknownness and our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it. The screen ... makes displacement appear as our natural condition. [Cavell 79: 39]

In both cases – cinema and divorce – we are dealing with a dialectics of presentness and absence, where modern society (as Freud commented in *Civilization and its Discontents*) creates new ways of overcoming distance, and in those new ways of overcoming distance, invents new forms of distance. (E.g. the freedom to love also implies the freedom to *not* love, as if isolation from each other was the natural state of individuals.) Thus the development of technologies such as telegraphy, cinema and radio mirrors the development of human feelings and relationships and laws and institutions in modernity, our intricate inflections of privacy and community. With this in mind we might surmise, with a minor leap of the imagination, that the fact that cinema takes an interest in the condition of marriage/divorce/remarriage goes to show that it (despite its aim to please) does take an interest in its own condition, the state of its “cinematic soul”.

III. The Unknown Woman

The silent scream

If we accept the argument above, we might essay that in a complementary manner the genre of the “Melodrama of the Unknown Woman” acknowledges its own cinematic status through meditations on the possibilities that the reconciliation between Self and Other is *not* granted. That is, the realization of the dread possibility that the human voice is *not* capable of reaching the public world. In this case, the genre being melodrama not comedy, rather than lively conversation we see how a woman’s voice fails to be joined with a responding voice, and remains mute or disjoint. I.e. the voice remains “asynchronous” with the world of others. Hence Cavell claims that the genre of the “melodrama of the unknown woman” can be derived from the comedy of remarriage through a process of negation. It deals with what happens when redemption, for various reasons, does *not* occur, that is, when the protagonists remain strangers

(i.e. unknown) to each other. The result is the melodramatic, silent scream of the unknown woman.

Hence one could say that the films in question are dealing with the failure of communication, or if you will, of dialogue (compare the snappy, comical exchanges between the remarriage-couples). In illustration of the genre's problematic, and its tone, as it says in the letter from "Lisa Berndle" to "Stefan" in the film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (providing the title for Cavell's book):

By the time you read this letter, I may be dead.... If this reaches you, you will know how I became yours when you didn't know who I was or even that I existed.

Put in other words, the process of mutual *education* fails to run its course or even to take place. The (potential) lovers remain blind to each others subjectivity, much like King Lear remained blind to the love of his daughter, or Othello to the love of his wife. We could say that the lovers of the melodrama of the unknown woman fail to mutually *recognize* each other. As Stefan says in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*:

Have you ever shuffled faces, like cards, hoping to find the one that lies somewhere just over the edge of your memory, the one you've been waiting for?

Indeed, if we think back to our discussion of Cavell's notion of the Wittgensteinian "scene of instruction", this can be seen as emblematic of the risks and uncertainties involved in education, or more broadly, in community. Indeed, it illustrates that there are no *rules* guaranteeing our alignment, insuring that we shall find each other in a common understanding of the world; to the contrary, since we have to rely on our precarious attunement, there is always a chance that we shall become strangers to each other, no longer "agreeing in judgment", no longer seeing the same things in the same way, under the same aspects. I.e. it illustrates how, in Cavell's words, it is of supreme importance that we, in order to understand each other's words, in fact share

...routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." [Cavell 94: 52]

Because, as Cavell puts it, “Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.” If this is indeed the case, then the passivity, muteness and alienation of the unknown woman testifies to the dire consequences of *not* sharing such “routes of interest and feeling”. In short, people who fall sufficiently far out of attunement no longer, as it were, occupy the same “world”; which is exactly the problem of the “unknown woman”: she is an outcast from the kingdom of intelligibility, haunting the world like an insubstantial ghost, taking part in no organic “form of life”. This is especially clear in the case of Lisa in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, where she mostly expresses herself in voice-over. Her appeal goes unheard, not being recognized as such; it is, in a Freud-Marxist language invited by Cavell, *repressed* by that world. Thus one could say that the melodrama of the unknown woman acknowledges the secrecy and silence which marks the space of her absent voice, which is an acknowledgement of the possibilities of isolation in modern society, and which the cinema figures exemplarily (at least in a worst-case scenario), its mechanical wheels turning, its audience sunk in darkness and silence, in thrall to the opiate visions provided by the capitalist “dream factory”. To wit, this dream-factory motif is abundantly represented in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, for instance in the scene where Lisa and Stefan travel in a mock-up train, a cinematographic landscape scrolling past, the couple essentially going nowhere.

Accordingly, we again see cinema enacting the modern dangers of excessive freedom, the freedom of the exile (the traveler going nowhere), the freedom of capitalist exploitation, the freedom of those who have nothing left to lose. In short the dangers of a freedom which has the potential to become merely *negative*, the empty liberty that paradoxically enslaves. So, in summary, while the comedy of remarriage at least *projects* the image of a successful attempt – through conversation – to reestablish attunement (a successful scene of instruction where the couple finally learns to love each other, treating each other as equals), the melodrama of the unknown woman is about the failure to unite, love remaining unrequited, mute, asymmetrical. Or, if the remarriage comedy is about the successful effort of individuals to transcend themselves, to become parts of something greater than themselves, the melodrama of the unknown woman is about the horror of being trapped in consciousness, the “theatre of the mind”, never gaining public recognition of one’s self. Thus these complementary genres become, at least in Cavell’s interpretation of them, a comment on the “state of the union” in the

age of cinema, i.e. the state of “union” as such in modernity, enacting its characteristic satisfactions and dissatisfactions.

Hence, while the comedy is about the release of longings in laughter (even when that laughter is slightly cynical), the melodrama is about the permanent frustration of longing, only released in the silent scream of death or madness. In consequence, the melodrama could be said to illustrate the tragic “truth of skepticism”, namely that there is no *guaranteed* way of knowing other people and the world. There *is* the possibility of getting lost, and it *is* a terrifying one, worthy of the horror and pity associated with Greek tragedy. Simultaneously, the melodrama highlights what the skeptic overlooks, namely the importance of acknowledgement and the possibility of overcoming skepticism through expressive means (letting the world know *you*) rather than through knowledge narrowly conceived. If we forget this, we are prone to (unconsciously) hide ourselves from each other (in Freudian denial), in effect avoiding that which we think we seek the most. Something, we should note, Lisa arguably does in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, posing the question if she is not as much of a narcissist as Stefan. And behaving like that, to quote Cavell from CH&UH, it is no wonder “we might never be found.” The choice, in a sense, is ours.

Viewed in this manner the melodrama of the unknown woman is about the lack of acknowledgement and its disastrous existential consequences much in the same manner as the Shakespearean tragedies treated in *Disowning Knowledge*. Meaning that here, in some of his latest work on film, Cavell comes face to face with the concerns of some of his earliest work on tragic drama. Indeed, as Cavell affirms, the melodrama of the unknown woman synthesizes the Freudian emphasis on joining the world in work and love, with the German Idealist dialectics of recognition, a synthesis which, as we saw in Chapter 3, were central to Cavell’s first engagement with Shakespeare’s tragedies in the issue of acknowledgment.

To conclude, in Cavell’s reading these more or less “commercial” Hollywood genres – Western, Remarriage, The Unknown Woman – mirror in their thematic-dramatic structure modernist cinematic explorations of human subjectivity in modernity, which, as we remember, could be emblemized by the “divorce” of sound and the image, the world and its projection, the self and its voice, the voice and the world. And tying them all together are the familiar themes of Cavell’s reading of Shakespeare, positing a human self between acknowledgement and avoidance, confronting an Other it both wants and does not want to reconcile itself with.

Thus I maintain that while in his later books on film Cavell shifts his attention to more popular cinematic work, as well as to more explicitly romanticist and moral perfectionist issues, he does not lose continuity with his more formal, and more modernist, reflections on the ontology of film in *The World Viewed*.

Chapter 9

The infinite essay

The problem of a return to the *polis* in Cavell's “politics of interpretation”

*...wherever there really is a love of wisdom – or call it the passion for truth – it is inherently, if usually ineffectively, revolutionary; because it is the same as a hatred of the falseness in one's character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one's institutions.*⁶⁵

Before we proceed with this chapter's theme let us take stock of our progress so far. In chapters 1-5 we discussed the unorthodox nature of Cavell's view of ordinary language philosophy, and of the problematic of human intelligibility as such. This issued in the realization that if we follow Cavell, we cannot *exhibit* the conditions of language and intelligibility, that is, neither (a) through the specification of a conceptual scheme or network of rules, nor (b) through a mere *description* of the empirical process of learning language. The reason for this was that in such an approach, whether structural or descriptive, we lose sight of the subtlety of the *attunement* of the subject to the world and others, which to Cavell is figured in the utopian vision of spontaneous agreement in judgment. And this would again entail that we lose sight of the dimension of subjectivity as such, or the *problematic of the self*, as radically figured in “Emersonian” moral perfectionism.

⁶⁵ [Cavell 02: xxxix]

Furthermore, we found that “straight” structural or descriptive approaches to the conditions of intelligibility left us unable to account for the motivation for Cavell’s peculiar philosophical *style*. This led us in chapters 6-8 to attempt another tack, suggested by Cavell himself in his choice of philosophical subject-matter. Namely, instead of trying to reconstruct the conditions of intelligibility, we should try to *philosophize about those conditions through a reflection on how they come to expression in art and aesthetics*. By way of Kant and Greenberg this devolved to a discussion of Cavell’s engagement with “high” modernism, which led in turn to a problematic of *alienation*, a perspective that was reinforced by our examination of some of Cavell’s work on tragedy (understood in a specifically modern sense) and cinema. In consequence, we were left in the previous chapter with an image, figured by the medium of film or “world projections” as such, of the human and in particular modern subject contemplating a “kingdom lost”, a “loss” only tentatively ameliorated by the utopian hopes of reconciliation represented by the comedy of “remarriage”. In short, Cavell’s view of tragedy and cinema corroborated, in its most radical, uncompromising form, the “Emersonian” moral perfectionist image of a self in *exile*, awaiting an infinitely deferred redemption.

The style is the man:

Cavell’s “mannerist” writing, and the infinite recounting of the infinitesimal detail

In view of the above we might again try to make sense of Cavell’s philosophical style, and how it ties in with his “politics of interpretation”. At this juncture I will try to inject a couple of notions that hopefully will help us in the direction of some kind of conclusion.

(a) Mannerism: The first notion is that Cavell’s attention to his own style is in some sense deliberately “exaggerated”. He makes as it were a *point* of having his own style. And to be sure, this way of flaunting an idiosyncratic style, following his “whim” (as Cavell says of Emerson), might be deemed *capricious* or *mannerist*. But my point is that this capriciousness and mannerism constitutes a philosophical point unto itself. Namely, by resorting to the caprice of a mannerist style, Cavell could be said to enact the problematic of the *self*, in particular the subtle role the self (our idiosyncratic “style” of being) plays in every response and decision that we make (rendering every response and decision implicitly “dramatic” or a “crisis”), even when we are not aware of it. In short, Cavell’s mannerist style, treating each word as if it was

critical, enacts how our whole manner-of-being-as-a-person permeates every line we write, every word we say, which is also why Emerson, in condemnation of his contemporary society, can expostulate that “every word they say chagrin us”.

(b) Fragments and details: The second notion is that Cavell deliberately sacrifices the “big picture” in favor of discussing *details*, even odd details. This fragmentary approach of course ruins the argumentative systematicity of his texts, but again for a philosophical reason. Namely, this attention to almost “infinitesimal” details (that is details unrestricted by any “lower bound” regarding what is of relevance) can be regarded as a statement about what makes the world a world, and what constitute our “being” in it: A fragmented complex of details too subtle to be reduced to any general *scheme*. Hence all the infinitesimal details regarding our “being-in-the-world-with-others”, at any given moment, cannot be put into a finite text (that is, encompassed by the finite mind or subject), nor can all these fragments be relied upon to form a definite whole. Yet, as I understand Cavell’s rhetorical strategy, instead of responding to this conundrum by resorting to the economic compromises of a higher level of abstraction, forgetting about everything that does not fit in, he elects to treat the ever growing sum of his writings as an *infinite essay*, an growing, crystalline texture where he persists *indefinitely* in “recounting” fragmentary details rather than constructing a “big picture”. To wit, it *is* the reconciliation of the “big picture” that is infinitely deferred, in favor of the juxtaposition of fragmented details under an indeterminate utopian vision of redemption. That is, a perfect agreement between all the details of existence, including all the idiosyncrasies of our individual selves, an agreement which is not forced by a schematic system, but arises *spontaneously* from each and every infinitesimal detail and each and every individual self. This, I take it, is how we could understand Cavell’s determination to keep “outstanding” the issue of the ultimate “power and domain” of ordinary language and its philosophical articulation.

Hence we could say that Cavell is building in his expanding oeuvre an endless philosophical collage, adding fragment to fragment, an unstable, outrageously proportioned composition that forms a self-conscious protest against every form of thought that tends to “forget” the idiosyncrasies of the individual self, as well as the fragmented character of the infinity of details and nuances making up our imperfect world, our limited language and our flawed relations to others. Which is another way of saying that Cavell’s endless philosophical essay or collage has a *subversive*, or perhaps better: *inversive* orientation vis-à-vis more traditional philosophical notions of a “conceptual scheme” or *system*. It is in this sense that Cavell’s

project can be regarded as a “counter-philosophy” (to use his own term), whose gesture is exactly to go “counter” to what he sees as the more “orthodox” philosophical movements, aiming for a clear-cut *synthesis*.

In comparison to this elaborate, avant-garde take on the project of OLP Austin’s more professorial elucidation of various language-uses undeniably seems rather plodding and conservative, or for that matter, naïve. But then again Cavell held open the possibility that the deadpan “naiveté” of his teacher was just a ruse on Austin’s behalf (a mask), a way of insinuating his earth-shaking views among conservative academics, who would never suspect that this “implacable professor”, this *Englishman*, was in point of fact a radical in their midst, a veritable Nietzsche. Another way of putting it would be to say that implicit in Austin’s approach to philosophy was a crisis of philosophy as well as of culture, a crisis of *intelligibility*, one that called forth an inordinary attention to ordinary language, the “implacable professor” scrutinizing common words with an almost hallucinatory intensity that hardly would have been necessary, or even meaningful, if ordinary language really could have been taken for granted. That is, if ordinary language really *had* been ordinary, rather than, at least in one perspective, something strange and uncanny. In this perspective one could suggest that what Cavell initially found puzzling about the “style” of Austin’s work and demeanor was that it discretely *concealed* this crisis rather than highlighted it. In contrast, the avant-garde philosophical-literary style of Cavell’s own work could be regarded as designed, on the model of a modernist work of art, to flamboyantly *embrace* the crisis of intelligibility in the very texture of the text. Yet, on this view there is enough continuity between Austin and Cavell to warrant Cavell’s insistence that he is “inheriting” Austin.

The sublime nuance

Tragedy, ordinary language philosophy and the fragmented conditions of intelligibility

The notions suggested above provide us with a take on Cavell’s fascination with the “methods” of OLP, not the least as displayed, despite all the differences of style and character, by Austin. Namely, the “recounting” of the infinitesimal distinctions of ordinary language can now be regarded as a philosophical point unto itself, demonstrating the complex and fragmentary character of human existence. In this view what others (such as Marcuse and Gellner) perceives

as pedantry becomes not only a virtue, but something sublime, an “esoteric” activity uncovering what in earlier times might have been called the subtlety of the Lord. (Compare this with how we in Chapter 1 regarded Cavell’s image of Austin as being that of a “rabbi”, recounting, say, all the infinite names of God.) On this view OLP teaches us that in even the simplest situations of daily life there is (right before us) an *infinite complexity*, like Pascal and Leibniz evoked it in a drop of water, or Montaigne on the shell of a tortoise, which in a sense renders the everyday itself sublime, and by the same token, uncanny, *unheimlich*, provocative of anxiety. The aim of Cavell’s “therapy” then becomes to master this anxiety, rather than merely repressing it, which amounts to, tentatively, mastering one’s own finite selfhood.

This also accounts for Cavell’s contention, to which I have attributed great significance, that while the “methods” of OLP are manifestly powerful, nobody has been able to render transparent the “nature and domain” of that power; least of all the ordinary language philosophers themselves. This is why, we could say, that Cavell’s view of ordinary language is in a sense “tragic” (in the modern sense of Chapter 7); we are separated from the sources of its power, unable to reconcile ourselves with it. In a slightly different turn of phrase, we could say that in our exiled condition we do not know language as a “whole”. We only encounter the power of language in infinity of *fragments*, seeing it, as it were, in a mirror darkly. Thus as far as our finite minds are concerned, the power of OLP, as the power of ordinary language itself, *resides in the detail*. Consequently, we cannot expect to validate OLP, nor ordinary language itself, by constructing a “big picture” of it; what makes OLP and ordinary language convincing *is* that they nourish themselves on the fragmented details of intelligibility, the exact tone and phrasing of every single utterance, as well as the volatile dependency on specific contexts of utterance and reception. Indeed, once the “big picture” is brought into the discussion, we come up against a radical shortcoming in our ability to make clear *how* and *why* are able to say and mean what we say and mean, and if we indeed “can” or “must” mean what we say.

This “tragic” view, focusing on the finitude of our powers, means that Cavell must necessarily be adverse to the “explanatory” approaches to OLP that has been prevalent from Malcolm and Albritton to Baker, Hacker and Kripke, because these tend to leave behind the fractured character of actual language-use, and in the same process, the fractured character of the *self* that inhabits (striving for wholeness in it) that language. Therefore, as I have tried to show in chapters 1-4, Cavell endeavors to pit these skeptic-dogmatic, reconstructive approaches against each other dialectically, so that they can be overcome from within.

This makes clear why (a) Cavell is somewhat sympathetic to the skeptic, and why (b) he prefers his “dramatic” reading of the PU. Namely, (a) if we assume that the fragmented character of life and language precludes that we can fully “know” the conditions of our own intelligibility, then the skeptic is in a sense right in pointing out that our lives are not built on knowledge. Indeed, this is the Cavellian “truth” of skepticism. What is wrong with skepticism, however, is that the skeptic thinks that our lives *should* be built on knowledge, that knowledge should be the measure of all things. Against this Cavell advances the contention that a human life should rather be built on “acknowledgement”, wherein we recognize that our lives *are* dependent on a host of fragmented details that we can neither know nor control. What we can merely *hope*, under the utopian ideal of spontaneous agreement, is that these conditions can, somehow, be made *ours* so that, in the utopian limit, our finite selves can be harmoniously reconciled *within* some kind of immanent continuity, i.e. rendered whole in a “redeemed” everyday. Hence on Cavell’s view we cannot simply dismiss the skeptic with a grammatical formula, but must arrive at the (practical) necessity of acknowledgment of the world and the other through a redemptive reading of the “truth” of skepticism, which is in a sense a tragic truth. Only then have we mastered the skeptical anxiety, as opposed to repressing it.

This leads (b) to the “dramatic” reading of the PU, where the voices appearing therein, and the aphoristic poetry punctuating their exchange, can be understood as an enactment of an attempt to overcome the skeptical and dogmatic impulses that seduce us to further alienate ourselves from intelligibility through a lack of acknowledgement of the fragmented conditions of our lives as finite subjects. This reading involves us with a moral perfectionist image of life, perhaps aporetic, which Cavell calls “Emersonian”, where our selves are always temporary, because we are forever striving for our *next* self, one that realizes more of the infinite possibilities of life, pieces together more of the fragments. In this sense our *final* self is forever “unattained”. Indeed, attainment to a final self would entail that the utopian redemption in spontaneous agreement had in fact come about, which would mean that the “drama” of human existence – the drama of exile – had come to an end. In consequence, it seems that Cavell prefers the notion that in finite existence reconciliation is endlessly deferred, so that the drama of life goes on and on, every single moment of our lives constituting a crisis potentially leading from one self to the next, and, in this process of horizontal transcendence, merely *figuring* the infinitely deferred redemption where we are *all* brought to a harmonious state of integrity, with ourselves, with each other and with the world, the secular version of “Judgment Day”.

Indeed, in accordance with the myths and theologies of former times (like those of Augustine), such a rendering whole of the world and the self would be effectuated by the regenerative powers of a divine agency, which in a sense creates the self and the world anew in an eschatological “event”. This vision is secularized in Cavell’s Emersonian moral perfectionism; that is, in terms of his Emersonian moral perfectionism (where the creating god is ultimately the self itself) this vision of regeneration implies that we must constantly destroy our “present” self, so that we may be reborn, by transcending ourselves, in the form of a “next” self. In sum, Cavell’s philosophical modernism, as an appropriation of the semi-religious radicalism of “Emersonian” moral perfectionism, is one that focuses on the ecstatic event of *crisis* (which implicitly occurs every moment), which is what makes it an inherently “dramatic” philosophy, never at rest for more than a brief moment. Hence Judgment Day is enacted every day.

Consequently Cavell’s utopian “politics of interpretation” merges with his Emersonian perfectionism, in the sense that Cavell is able to read various texts, paradigmatically the PU, *as* a quest for redemption, an infinite quest for the wholeness of the self and the wholeness of the world, and, not the least, the wholeness of language, which could roughly be described as reading those texts “romantically” or “modernistically”, or for that matter, eschatologically. Ultimately this approach, exemplified by Emerson and Thoreau, to reading and writing translates into a political project since, according to Cavell:

Thoreau’s prophetic call for a transfiguration of himself and his fellow men constitutes an act of political friendship: by withdrawing from political organization as it stands in order to reconsider its terms and conditions, he in effect associates with it. [Hammer 02: 140]

Thus on Cavell’s romanticist-modernist politics of interpretation, *every* philosophical and literary text, and indeed every product of human culture, tends to be regarded as harboring a “secret” or “esoteric” yearning for utopian reconciliation (which is at the same time a struggle with skepticism), even those texts that on the face of it seems to dogmatically reject such issues. Because the more they resist such visions, the more they latently express them, pointing with a Blochian “read arrow” to the repressed hope of reconciliation.

Three is a crowd

The dangers of self-imposed exile

However, this profoundly radical way of thinking, and of appropriating other philosophical and cultural projects, is also what leads to the deep-seated *dilemmas* of Cavell's philosophical modernism. Or rather, it leads to one dilemma with several facets. What I am thinking of is the dilemma of *self-imposed exile*. Namely, the way that Cavell introduces the radical tenets of "Emersonian" moral perfectionism into his reading of the PU, and thus into his view of ordinary life and language, invites a narrative of our finite existence where we are condemned to *restlessness*, forever looking for our "next self", never at *home* where we are. This is a function of Hammer's contention that the Emersonian perfectionist is associating with community *by* refusing it. If this is true, association has become completely apocryphal to the moral perfectionist: The only way of "authentically" participating in society is by withdrawing to the margins of that society. Meaning that the radicalism of "Emersonian" moral perfectionism leads to a feeling of not being at home in the world (society) in what Cavell calls its "present dispensation"; and since the final self is *endlessly* deferred (transgressing *every* "dispensation"), this means that these terms of analysis imposes upon us a condition of *permanent exile*, which constitute a certain kind of tragic fate, albeit in a specifically romanticist-modernist sense discussed in the two previous chapters. The danger is then that one shall fall into a disdain for, or lack of sensitivity to, those who have a more affirmative view of existence, and their more concrete projects in life and in society. This, in short, is the danger of *pride* that comes with the territory of moral perfectionism, as it does with the territory of modernism.

The crucial point is that apparently the only way of staying true to the *radical* perfectionist precept of unyielding opposition to the compromises and prejudices of any attained self and any attained society, becomes to treat life itself as an endless deferral, an infinite, ironical essay (in the manner of Novalis' "infinite novel") where every self is just a "sketch"; in short, the self becomes part of an eternal flux, as has been paradigmatically rendered in the work of Friedrich Schlegel. That is, in Schlegel's own words:

Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos [Eldridge 97: 84]

Thus the reading of the PU, and life, as a constant “drama” *could* lead to the notion of life as an ironical essay, where every dispensation of the self, of society, of human relations (including marriage) must be regarded as temporary, just one flash in an infinite succession of flashes. Indeed, this is one possibility of the “romanticist” approach to philosophy, as pointed out by Eldridge in *Leading a human life*. Among other things, Eldridge in this book as it were “tests out” the ironic possibility of the “dramatic” interpretation of the PU in a cross-reading with the fragmentary essayism of Schlegel. To wit, Eldridge recalls how to a certain kind of romanticist sensibility

Cultivating this eternal agility, which Schlegel elsewhere calls incomprehensibility, is the only route to a human life, one that does not betray our spontaneity, which is our sole strength. [Eldridge 97: 84]

Eldridge seems to think that a dramatic reading of the PU (his own, and, I surmise, by implication Cavell’s) *can* be steered away from this ironical extreme, by keeping the opposing forces of dogmatism and skepticism in sufficient balance. To Eldridge this paradigmatically means keeping in balance the tenets of Hegel and Schlegel. Because, as Eldridge writes, when we juxtapose Hegel and Schlegel we see that for completely opposite reasons

...both stances undo or deny our senses of ourselves as groping, imperfect bearers of expressive freedom. [Eldridge 97: 85]

I will not go into Eldridge’s reading of the PU, per se, since it deserves a substantial treatment of its own.⁶⁶ I only use his highlighting of Schlegelian irony as one possible outcome of a dramatic reading of the PU as a point of departure for my analysis of the dilemmas of Cavell’s radical philosophical modernism. That is, I will try to bring out the persistence of what I see as the problem of Cavell’s disdain for principles and institutions (call it rules) by showing that certain tenets of his modernist-romanticist moral perfectionist “politics of interpretation” *does* end up in a Gordian knot when he tries to extend his dramatic reading of the PU to an “Emersonian” (or if you want Schlegelian⁶⁷) reading of Plato’s *Republic*.

⁶⁶ I have found it useful to read [Eldridge 97] in conjunction with [Eldridge 89]; this comparison also highlights the differences between Cavell and Eldridge’s projects. Namely, Eldridge can be understood as advocating a flexible approach to principles (i.e. a flexible approach to the classical tradition from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel), and thus as propagating an “Enlightened” romanticism, while Cavell is in effect pushing a much crasser, aporetic form of avant-garde philosophical modernism, ultimately more at home in the age of Kafka than that of Goethe.

⁶⁷ Cf. the view of the “Socratic muse” professed in §42 of Schlegel’s *Critical Fragments*. “Philosophy”, says Schlegel, “is the real homeland of irony.” [Bernstein 03: 241]

The complementarity of ascent and descent:

Some critical comments on Cavell's appropriation of Plato's *Republic*

Cavell's notion of "Emersonian" moral perfectionism is intimately connected with an act of *striving*. Yet, as we have learned, since the goal itself is indeterminate, Cavell sees this perfectionism as appealing to a notion of perfection without *fixed* ends, no "absolute" ideal. The course of this kind of perfectionism is the endless journey of self-overcoming, attaining a further, next self, not "the" highest self, because "each state of the self is, so to speak, final" [Cavell 90: 3]. One might say that Cavell is using Emerson to "temporalize" Plato, or if you want, to transform his notion of transcendence from a "vertical" to a "horizontal" one. It is with this in mind we should evaluate Cavell's engagement with Plato in *Cities of Words*, where he states that:

With respect to the characterization of perfectionism, *The Republic* is not only the most extended and systematic treatment, or portrait, among the great philosophers of the perfectionist perception of the moral life – a perception of it as moving from a sense of and state of imprisonment to the liberation of oneself by the transforming effect of philosophy – it also consistently portrays philosophy's address to that process as directed not to the assessment of individual acts as right or wrong, good or bad, but to the evaluation of the worthiness of ways of life, an earmark of the perfectionist ambition. [Cavell 04: 37]

I take Cavell's idea to be that because of, to use Heideggerian terms, our future-directed manner of being-in-the-world (as opposed to being wholly confined to the "cave" of the here and now) we cannot out of hand quit the notion of striving for something "more." Thus we may ontologically deflate traditional Platonic assumptions about a "higher" reality, yet we must retain the underlying transcendence-oriented pattern of thought dramatized in the Platonic *dialogue*. This dialogue Cavell describes as constitutive of a "city of words," which is the communal locus of our "spontaneous" moral perfectionist process of self-transcendence. Thus, referring to the *Republic*, Cavell writes in CH&UH:

...suppose the noting of "our city" is a standing gesture toward the reader, or overhearer, to enter into the discussion, to determine his or her own position with respect to what is said--assenting, puzzled, bullied, granting for the sake of argument, and so on. Then the city has, in each such case of reading, one more member than the members

depicted in a Platonic (or Wittgensteinian, or Emersonian) dialogue.
[Cavell 90: 8]

Similarly, in *Cities of Words* Cavell professes that

About Plato's myths, my attachment to them is not simply that they are images, easier to appreciate than arguments, and not that they illustrate, and make more convincing, the conclusions or premises of Plato's arguments – such testimony is familiarly given. My attachment to Plato's myths is more likely to be rather that they illustrate, hence potentially extend, or expose, turns of philosophical thinking that I have found myself convinced by. [Cavell 04: 327]

Thus, going back to Cavell's dialectical reading of the PU, its "dramatic" structure is as it were prefigured by Plato's dialogues, hence Plato and Wittgenstein can both be subsumed under his perfectionist "politics of interpretation". Cavell argues so quite explicitly in the chapter on Plato in *Cities of Words*. "I might say", he writes,

...that it was an important step in this discovery to articulate the Investigations' idea of philosophical progress not as from false to true assertions, or from opinions to proven conclusions (say theses), or from doubt to certainty, but rather from the darkness of confusion to enlightened understanding, or say from illusion to clarity, or from being at an intellectual loss to finding my feet with myself, from insistent speech to productive silence (perhaps in the form of thinking through an image). [Cavell 04: 328]

Yet the problem with Cavell's reading of the *Republic*, as I see it, is that he persists in refusing to treat seriously one central tenet of its "argument", which is the need for some kind of *mediation* between the supreme ideal of "oneness-in-diversity", the Platonic perfect whole (which could be aligned with the ideal of spontaneous agreement which informs perfectionism), and the level of political "realities". That is, Cavell refuses to deal seriously with the need to found the everyday world of the polis through some kind of *curtailment* of individual spontaneity, that is, through an acceptance of the general principles, embodied in institutions, governing the state.⁶⁸ This would at the same time lead to the curtailment of the

⁶⁸ This is where I perceive a marked difference between Cavell and Eldridge's projects, although they have much in common. This is especially so in [Eldridge 89], where he in a sense meets Rawls half-way, that is, in an a posteriori, rather than a priori discussion of principles. Namely, Eldridge *is*, in contrast to Cavell, apparently willing to engage in the concrete and sustained working out – as in his readings of Conrad, Austen and others – of the constraints that a subject must impose on itself in order to live in *social* community with others. In contrast, Cavell seems more focused on what the self can do in order to break free from any given constraints (which he, like Emerson, tends to read as prejudices), without offering a sustained analysis of what could be put in their place. Hence Eldridge is closer, especially in [Eldridge 89], than Cavell to the "classical" tradition when it comes

radically *open* interpretative stance Cavell transfers from his dramatic reading of the PU to his reading of the *Republic*. Yet this conundrum is lithely avoided, when, comparing Wittgenstein and Plato's positions of enunciation, Cavell merely notes that

The *Investigations* does not share, indeed it stands against, the *Republic's* idea of a goal of perfectibility, a foreseeable path to a concluding state of the human. The idea of life's journey, say the quest to take one's life upon oneself, to become the one you are, is no longer expressed in the image of a path, but rather, I would say, in the very idea of walking as such, in contrast to a chaos of slipping and sliding or to the nightmare of paralysis. The measure of direction, or progress, is not assured by a beacon from afar ... but rather pointed to by what Emerson figures as a gleam of light over an inner landscape, and which concretely is guided, and tested, by whether the next step of the self is one that takes its cue from the torment, the sickness, the strangeness, the exile, the disappointment, the boredom, the restlessness, that I have claimed are the terms in which Philosophical Investigations portrays the modern subject. [Cavell 04: 329]

The archetypal pattern of Cavell's "Emersonian" brand of Platonism is thus the endless journey of self-overcoming whose central focus is the process of attaining a further, *next* self, not on pressures of reconciling the present self with the demands of any *actual* community. I.e. the direction of Emersonian perfection is decided, as Cavell says,

...by nothing beyond the way of the journey itself [Cavell 90: 10]

Thus the itinerary of the perfectionist self is characterized by "goallessness" [Cavell 90: xxxiv]; by the refusal of *actual* perfectibility, or more modestly, actual satisfaction. And by the same token the perfectionist self loathes to be restrained by general principles, or the institutions embodying them. But where does that put us when it comes to dealing with day to day problems of actual life? How does that harmonize with the need for operating actual institutions such as courts and governments? Does not the only option of the radical perfectionist, contemptuous of these practical issues, become to withdraw to his abode in the woods in order to write in solitude? Hence it is, on my view, Cavell's refusal of any sustained treatment of the rational need to *curtail* the spontaneity of the self (under relatively fixed principles) in the public domain that consigns the rebellious philosopher-persona of Cavell to a self-imposed exile. And the irony is, of course, that this is a position that sits uneasily with the

to views on virtues and principles, self and society. Which is to say that Eldridge does not share Cavell's avant-gardism, nor his mannerism.

substantial institutional system presented in the *Republic*, and its strong emphasis on matters of discipline. Indeed, the *Republic* postulates institutions which the self has to deal with in order to *become* a “well-rounded” self, participating in the satisfactions of what in the Hegelian-Freudian mode could be called “work and love”, which Plato ultimately would interpret as expressions of the cosmic harmony.⁶⁹

Accordingly, in Socrates’ discourse in Book II of the *Republic* it is the institutions of the communal whole which serves, qua subject “writ large”, as a template for the analysis of the self and its intrinsically political virtues. Namely, Socrates finds at the end of Book I that he is unable to comprehend justice and virtue on the level of the individual. Indeed, having let the discussion run its “spontaneous” course in Book I, snatching at various “details” of the problem, as if they formed a table or collage of “dishes”, Socrates realizes that

...I have not dined well, however – by my own fault, not yours. But just as gluttons snatch at every dish that is handed along and taste it before they have properly enjoyed the preceding, so I, methinks, before finding the first object of our inquiry – what justice is – let go of that and set out to consider something about it, namely whether it is vice and ignorance or wisdom and virtue. And again, when later the view was sprung upon us that injustice is more profitable than justice I could not refrain from turning to that from the other topic. *So that for me the present outcome of the discussion is that I know nothing.* [Hamilton 89: 605, my italic]⁷⁰

Consequently, to give the discussion a more principled form, Socrates proposes a return to the constraints of the sphere of the polis in Book II.⁷¹ That is, here we read that

⁶⁹ Indeed, the radically “open” reading of Plato would fit far better with the later works than with the *Republic*. As Guthrie writes in his history of Greek philosophy (volume V) about the *Parmenides*:

On this interpretation the *Parmenides* is an aporetic dialogue with a difference. The early dialogues showed Socrates skilfully reducing a respondent ... to aporia, thereby exposing the confusion of thought underlying the popular use of language. In the meantime he has become a teacher with elaborate positive doctrines about Forms, soul, the physical world and their mutual relations. With astonishing artistry as well as flexibility of mind Plato now transforms him again, this time into a young man, keenly intelligent and eager for truth yet in argument no match for a great philosopher, in order to subject these positive doctrines to an examination from the other’s point of view. [Guthrie 78: 58]

Though Guthrie is vary about the significance of this “second-level” aporia in the work of Plato, apparently striking to the heart of Plato’s own doctrine of ideas, he contends that it suggests “how far Plato has come from the easy, dogmatic assurance of his golden period. The old Greek problem of the One and the Many ... was not so easily conquered.” [Guthrie 78: 60]

⁷⁰ Plato: *The Republic*, 354a.

⁷¹ I am indebted for this approach to my supervisor, Professor Ståle Finke.

There is a justice of one man, we say, and, I suppose, also of an entire city? ... Then, perhaps, there would be more justice in the larger object, and more easy to apprehend. If it please you, then, let us first look for its quality in states, and then only examine it also in the individual, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less. [Hamilton 89: 615]⁷²

The crucial point in regard to these two quotes is: (1) That the *Republic* seems to suggest (dramatized in terms of Socrates' confusion at the end of Book I) that mere conversation is not enough to mediate in immanent life between individuals (nor to constitute the well-rounded individual as such); we also need institutions, and institutions are as such distinct from the "ideal" (and largely imagined) community of a spontaneous dialogue, which could be called, to use Cavell's phrase, a "city of words". Thus (2) even when we are merely philosophizing, the "voice" of the *Republic* seems to be suggesting in the latter quote, we have to take into account the large-scale dynamics of political institutions, wherein the individual is just an element, a part of a greater whole. This would explain why Plato, in this phase of his work at least, was so concerned with the political (enough to write the *Republic*): the individual is not distinct from the political (taken in an institutional sense), but constituted in terms of it – an idea that moves further to the fore with Aristotle's "political animal". Thus an interest in the "state of one's soul" leads to an interest in the state of the *polis*. Hence the spontaneous freedom of philosophical discourse cannot be regarded as totally impervious to the constraints applying to the sphere of institutions *as such*; the discourse has to take them into account; they must, to borrow Cavell's locutions, be recounted and accounted for, so that we can acknowledge that they *count*. Which suggests that the *Republic* can be regarded as injecting (or internalizing) a political commitment, a commitment *to* the political (understood as the rule of law, and therefore a rule in conjunction with principles), into philosophy as such. This notion, I think, creates problems for Cavell's reading of the *Republic*, indicating it to be more than a little biased. Indeed, one might be led to think that Cavell in this case has attempted to appropriate a text that in some aspects runs counter to his own purposes.

⁷² Plato: *The Republic*, 368e.

A matter of principle

From the city of words to the city of institutions

That the constraints of institutions is a sensitive issue for Cavell is signaled by the contention, quoted at the head of this chapter, that a true “love of wisdom” is accompanied by a hatred of the falseness of the self and the compromises of its institutions. There is nothing in this quote, nor in Cavell’s work as a whole, which indicates that this “hatred” cannot be directed at *any* given institution. Thus Cavell says nothing that assures us that “Emersonian” moral perfectionism does not in effect imply a hatred for institutions *as such*. Meaning that “Emersonian” moral perfectionism *could* be interpreted as harboring an anarchist aversion against political “realities” as such, every sizeable organization of people being regarded as a madding crowd, rife with prejudice; that is, a hatred for all forms of politics that does not play out in a spontaneous dialogue. Because, to repeat, as Cavell puts it,

...wherever there really is a love of wisdom – or call it the passion for truth – it is inherently, if usually ineffectively, revolutionary; because it is the same as a hatred of the falseness in one’s character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one’s institutions. [Cavell 02: xxxix]

True, it here says hatred of the “needless” and “unnatural” compromises in one’s institutions, not hatred of institutions and compromises as such. But, one might ask, what kind of compromises are not in a sense “needless” and “unnatural”, and what kind of institutions are not in part built on such compromises? Thus, at the very least, if one is to reject compromises on the grounds that they are “needless”, then one should at least engage, in a sustained fashion, in the working out of the compromises that *are* needed. But in order to do that, one must swallow one’s pride, dirtying one’s hands, at least somewhat (and herein resides the compromise: how much?), on the prejudices of one’s time, and, at the very least, be willing to go into a sustained discussion of *principles*, rather than endlessly deferring such issues in order to enact the infinite quest for “true” reconciliation. Which also means that one must be willing to propose the outline of *stable* political solutions, solutions that address the practical needs of a society and its members in more or less predictable ways.

Instead, if one should take its semi-eschatological rhetoric seriously, it appears that Emersonian moral perfectionism ultimately issues in a call for permanent (if “ineffective”) revolution, as modeled not only by the spontaneity of philosophical discussion, but also, as we have seen in

Chapter 6, by avant-garde art at its most extreme. To wit, the closest Cavell comes to a concrete political vision is the general idea of an Emersonian “perfectionist” democracy and of “America” as the natural setting for the realization of it, indeed, the general idea that this “new, yet unapproachable America” is “Eden”, i.e. some kind of paradise *regained*. [Cavell 92: 59] Yet this remains rather vague as a *political* project; it merely points to an imagined America “next” to the “present” one, a ghostly presence testified to by the words carved at the feet of the Statue of liberty:

*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles...*

What primarily seems to attract Cavell in this kind of romanticist, American eschatology is the very *image* of the redeemer (torch raised, pointing to the “golden door”), and in the same gesture, the inundation of the ordinary (say the American) with some existential significance that eludes the concerns of “practical” political work. Indeed, an unkind critic might suspect that Cavell’s “politics of interpretation” implies a determination to *keep* interpreting texts, forever, rather than acting on them. Thus paradoxically, as Hammer puts it, “Emersonian perfectionism does not result in any particular moral or political demands.” [Hammer 02: 142] In consequence, on my view the potential problem with Cavell’s moral perfectionist “politics” of interpretation is not that it is undemocratic (as Rawls feared with Nietzsche’s perfectionism), but that it is simply *unpolitical*. In short, there is a danger of the “politics of interpretation” becoming interpretation *instead* of politics, leaving, with a mixture of disdain and deference, the active societal participation, the “particular moral or political demands”, to “worldly” (read: simple) men. What is left instead to the moral perfectionist is an unworldly ethics of “infinite responsibility” [Hammer 02: 142] where the perfectionist is equally responsible for everything in the whole creation, every blade of grass and every sparrow, with no discrimination between levels of importance. A fortiori, to the extent that the moral perfectionist avoids making concrete ethical and political demands, he or she is liable to a charge that moral perfectionism is being used as an excuse for withdrawing from institutional politics, into a sphere of idealized, but ineffective responsibility. One might imagine that such a charge was backed up by a contention that politics consists in acts of prioritizing, and therefore should comprise arguments to the effect that some things are more important than others, which intrinsically militates against the logic of infinite responsibility, where everything and everyone is accorded

supreme worth. That is, if one follows George Orwell in his contention that politics is about choosing the lesser of evils, the moral perfectionist's insistence on treating every kind of evil (Emerson: *every* word they say chagrin us) on an equal footing, amounts to nothing short of a rejection of politics as such. In short, the moral perfectionist is liable to a charge that his eschatologically inflected discourse of infinite responsibility, if pursued without compromise, in the end degenerates to empty talk, insensitive to the "real needs" of human society.

On this note, returning to the subject of style (Cavell's "politics of style" so to say), the sensitivity of the issue of "institutional" political activity to Cavell is figured in the curtailment of individual spontaneity that the public domain might incur on the idiosyncrasies deliberately flaunted in his "mannerist" mode of writing. Worse, the need for such curtailment could even imply a restriction on the level of associativity practicable in discourse, public debate typically demanding that we stick to the "big picture", and not lose track of the "main idea" in favor of a personal, not to say "romantic", fascination with infinitesimal fragments, which is one reason why the *Republic* is skeptical towards the arts: They divert the citizen from a comprehension of *principles* in favor of a tarrying with irrelevant details. Indeed, such demands of the "public" use of reason that one should "get to the point" and "stick to it", rather than follow one's own Emersonian "whim" wherever it might lead, retaining the freedom to change the subject or direction of the discourse at any instant (aiming for total control over his own performance, like an improvising soloist at the height of ecstatic inspiration), is exactly what Cavell's essayism can be regarded as a protest against. He does not *want* to be "principled"; it curtails his freedom to improvise, to play it by ear. Hence the steely firmness of resolve that Plato apparently advocates in the *Republic*, along with an almost Spartan subordination to the collective, sits uneasily with Cavell's avant-garde, aesthetically inspired ideals of personal freedom and articulation.

Thus Cavell may well claim that Emersonian moral perfectionism has to do with "the condition of democratic morality" [Cavell 90: 125], but a critic would still be entitled to ask how *that* conditions pertain to an institutional rule of law, which hardly can be separated from democracy. And on that score Cavell appears conspicuously silent. Hence his avoidance of the classical political-philosophical problematic of the rule of law (which of necessity must be treated in a systematic manner, since it is based on principles) could be regarded as, of necessity perhaps (i.e. as a function of his commitment to the rhetorical strategies of "high" modernism), forming a lacuna in Cavell's work. That is, to the extent Cavell's choice of

philosophical style forbids him to systematically discuss matters of principles and institutions, this inability points towards an inbuilt limitation in his philosophical modernism. This could indeed be understood as an analogue to the inbuilt limitation that became part of the condition of modernist painting once it decided to eschew all figurative content: It could no longer lodge particular moral or political proposals, but had to content itself with making mute, some would say esoteric, gestures at the margin of society, assuming responsibility for everything and nothing.

Which portrait of the human?

Mannerism versus classicism

Another way of regarding the discord between Cavell's city of *words* and what could be seen as Plato's city of *institutions* would be like this: Cavell argues that the *Republic* (like the PU) paints a "portrait of the human". This picture he regards as a moral perfectionist one (in a highly romanticist and modernist sense), presenting the image of a deeply sensitive person, endlessly engrossed in the idiosyncrasies of his or her own selfhood, and the infinitesimal nuances of a language and a world caught in perennial flux. Yet one could also think that the *Republic* paints an altogether different "portrait of the human": Namely a portrait of the "public man" (or woman), an individual that is not lost in endless (self-) contemplation, but engaged in the exercise of practical reason, that is, in bringing the perspective of ideas, through the formulation of principles, to bear on the concrete issues of human life, paradigmatically in the institutional rule of law. This would also fit well with the Aristotelian education of the free citizen, which tries to balance "judgment" and "principles" against each other, rather than abandoning principles in favor of judgment altogether, which in a sense would mean to subordinate the ethics and politics of the polis to a notion of judgment that would be more at home in the salon-aesthetics to arise more than 2000 years later.⁷³

In Platonic terms, a "complete" or well-balanced individual would both have taken part of (i) an "ascent" of dialectical discourse, where the "received" opinions about the world are tested in the face of all the distinctions that can be brought to bear on a concept, and (ii) a "descent" where the insight at the level of "ideas" gained through unfettered speculation are brought down to the level of practical principles, principles that can be applied in the everyday world of

⁷³ It would also fit with the Hegelian contention that in modernity political-philosophical thought eclipses art as the central expression of the human spirit.

the *polis*, that is, implemented at the institutional level, mediating between the particular and the general on the ground. Indeed, this journey of ascent and descent is illustrated by Plato in Socrates' speech in the *Symposion*, and in the way the liberated individual returns to the cave in the *Republic*. Or, in more modern, Kantian-Hegelian terms, the well-balanced individual would recognize that we need to "act on principle in an ongoing, fulfilling and cooperative way" [Eldridge 89: 5].

The crux is that a resolutely "political" individual that has partaken both of the ascent *and* the descent would hardly put him or her self in the position of self-imposed exile, but would rather take up a station squarely in the agora of the public world. This well-balanced stance, one might further surmise, would entail the abandonment of the labyrinthine recounting of infinitesimal details, and indeed of "mannerist" modes of presentation, simply because "mannerism" *is* the stylistic violation of balance, in the sense that it consciously questions the classical ideals of formal clarity in harmonious proportion. Meaning that, symbolically, mannerism can be read as the stylistic flouting of classical ideals of the harmonious interaction of part and whole (as expressed for instance in Aristotle's poetics), and as such can be seen as indicative of a flouting of what Eldridge characterizes as the acknowledgment of both the "requirements of universal moral principle" and the "pull on us of the world and society" [Eldridge 89: 3]. Hence we could surmise that to the classical, well-balanced individual, a certain directness in speech and writing is part of being a political person; something that is vouched for by the Greco-Roman (call it republican) tradition of public address, where clarity is of the essence. That is, to a classically educated, publicly minded person valuing clarity of expression, as well as an adherence to principle, as points of political honor (indeed, as points defining political conduct as such), the Cavellian avant-garde perfectionist, practicing an idiosyncratic, mannerist essayism, would hardly be distinguishable from the skeptic; and what is worse, appear to be engrossed in a proud (in the Biblical sense), self-centered attitude of sterile and esoteric *protest*, issuing in an aversion for the reality of institutions as such.

I will of course not argue that what I have suggested above is necessarily the *right* interpretation of the *Republic*, nor of the "classical" view of political conduct, nor of the tradition of "public man" that can be related to it. I am merely pointing out that an emphasis on the complementarity of "ascent" and "descent" in the *Republic*'s "portrait of the human" is possible, which indicates that philosophy must take the reality of political institutions into account, even if that in some contexts constrains the spontaneity and openness of dialogue.

That is, in a wider sense, it is possible to read the philosophical tradition, especially in the “classical” form harkening back to antiquity, as being concerned with the complementarity of details and principles, individuals and structures, liberation and law, criticism and construction, dynamism and stability, manifold and unity. My point being that this side of the philosophical project – geared towards principles and institution-building, which one could interpret as intrinsically political conditions – is not one that Cavell puts much effort into, nor displays much sympathy or understanding for, instead putting all emphasis on the notion of spontaneous agreement in judgment, *apart from all general institutions and principles*. Thus Cavell simply leaves us with a blank when it comes to certain classical, and one might say legitimate, philosophical concerns. In conclusion: While Cavell certainly brings to attention dimensions of the political life that has been ignobly ignored by other theorists, he in the same gesture tends to repress other dimensions of that problematic which after all remains legitimate even after his criticism has taken its toll. What I primarily take this to illustrate is how one-sided Cavell’s “politics of interpretation” can become when he tries to read virtually everything in the Western canon as premonitions of his own brand of avant-garde, aesthetically inflected, romanticist-modernist moral perfectionism, one that potentially saddles us with a proud, uncompromising subjectivity locked in a marginal political position, forever consumed by a “hatred of the falseness in one’s character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one’s institutions.” Or to put it slightly otherwise: I have attempted to highlight the tension that appears, or may appear, when Cavell tries to align the position of the modern philosopher with the romanticist or modernist image of the *alienated artist*, that is, when “the logical form of modern philosophy” is identified too emphatically with “the logical form of modernist works”.

Accepting the dangerous gift of freedom Between pride and prejudice

What I have said above does not mean so much that I find errors in Cavell’s philosophical modernism, as that I suspect that it has certain intrinsic *limitations*. Limitations, to be sure, that are proportional to the great strengths of his approach, which I hope that I have managed to bring to the fore in the previous chapters. Thus my critical reflections merely highlights, as I have suggested, that Cavell’s philosophical modernism could be regarded as somewhat one-sided, perhaps even somewhat prideful in its idiosyncrasies, which again means that it might not necessarily be regarded as spelling out the *only* conditions on which “modern” philosophy

can be carried out. Hence, to emphasize: What I regard as problematic in Cavell is not his “mannerist” style, including his construction of a suggestive collage of fragmented details. Not as such. These gestures can be seen as constituting liberating moves “upwards” and “onwards”, breaking through reified “forms of conscious” (to use that classical locution), in which case the freedom of philosophy is not too unlike the freedom of avant-garde art.

However, what is problematic is that Cavell does not convincingly relate this liberating movement of ascent to the necessity of a subsequent descent to earth, to the everyday world of the *polis*. Indeed, the implicit assumption of Cavell’s strategy of the “infinite essay” is rather that the ascent can go on and on, in the endless stream of a totally open juxtaposition of fragmented details and perspectives, without ever needing to think about a *closing* of the discussion, which would force the extraction of some kind of applicable *principles* from the discourse. Furthermore, this refusal to extract a “big picture” from the discourse in effect renders philosophy (like “high” modernist art) politically marginal, because the philosophers become unable to intervene with suggestions about how the actual compromises of society could be brought closer to the ideals of spontaneous agreement *through* the mediation of principles (say principles of justice.) Thus what is problematic with Cavell’s philosophical modernism, and his utopian politics of interpretation, is not that he takes off on a radical dialectical path of ascent, blazing forth in an idiosyncratic style, bringing in details and combinations of details nobody else would think of, splitting infinitesimals and inverting principles of categorization in the process, but that he does not *complete* the dialectics by bringing it back to the context of the everyday polis, a return which is an obligation (and constraint) shared by more traditional forms of philosophy, whether explicitly “political” or not.

At least this lack of classical commitment to institutional realities (including, one might say, the institutional realities of “academic” philosophy), signaling a reluctance to acknowledge how institutions not only restrain our freedom, but also enable it, renders Cavell’s philosophy, at least potentially, somewhat one-sided, even arrogant, and at worst confines it to the alienated sphere of the *mere* “experiment”. Which is to say that his philosophical modernism stands, like most modernisms, if allowed to become too uncompromising and self-righteous, in danger of becoming *merely* a “counter-philosophy”, merely a “manner” or “jargon”, the product of a rebellious or eccentric “beautiful soul”, parasitical upon (and resentful of) more conventional, and more affirmative projects. Thus one could say that my criticism against Cavell is that he is

perhaps not *dialectical enough*; in the play between details and principles, fragments and integration, he is too much on the side of details and fragments. Hence Cavell's line of work is not the philosophical symphony, but rather the philosophical miniature, the philosophical etude, yet extended into a giant arabesque. This may ultimately deflate the *tension* of his work; in short, the infinite essay, ironically holding back resolutions indefinitely, may become monotonous, like listening forever to Debussy's etudes of 1915.

I might illustrate this with a simile, comparing the human body and a jellyfish. Both the body and the jellyfish constitute meaningful (even beautiful) wholes, consisting of infinitesimal cells joined together more or less harmoniously. But while both have a microscopic constitution in this sense, only the body combines the micro-forms with a macrostructure, and this combination is what gives the human figure its supreme dialectical tension of part and whole. Thus Cavell, like certain modernist composers, is strong on the dialectics of the micro-level, making it into sort of a specialty, but correspondingly weak on macro-level development.⁷⁴ And perhaps necessarily so, to the extent that this modernism may be considered as a questioning of the classical idea of organic unity as such. Hence the problem with Cavell's appropriation of the *Republic* may be that he in effect reduces a philosophical symphony (perhaps the greatest ever) to an infinite philosophical etude or essay. Because while Cavell reasonably enough is keen to impress upon us that the manifold should not too easily be reduced to the "one" of unity, he fails to engage with Plato's central concern, namely the mystery that there is large-scale figuration at all, that the cosmos in a certain sense *is* like a symphony (or body), and that we are able to mirror that overall unity in the construction of our human institutions (the body politic), a structure that extends community beyond the intimacy of friendship and marriage, or if one wants, beyond the intimacy of fine art. Which implies that Cavell in his aesthetically inspired avant-gardism may be making *too* short shrift of the tradition of the philosophical system, or at least systematic philosophy, and its classical connections to political thought, and to the idea of "reason" more generally.

Yet the narrow strait separating the Schylla of prejudice (muting the individual voice in order not to upset the stability of the "organic" whole) from the Charybdis of pride (disdaining institutions in the name of personal integrity) is something we must all chart our course through as members of modern societies, the body politic. Indeed, this may be the inherent dilemma of

⁷⁴ Cf. [Dalhaus 89]: *Between Romanticism and Modernism*.

liberty, or free will itself, that most dangerous of gifts. If Cavell has not brought us much closer to a resolution of that dilemma, he has at least dramatized it in an unforgettable way. In a sense he is, in his own peculiar way, telling us to accept this gift, whatever the costs. Accordingly, in the words of Espen Hammer, whether Cavell's modernist experiment "counts as the continuation of philosophy or as its final overcoming is a matter of one's own response." [Hammer 02: 179] This prickly issue I take to be at the heart of Cavell's challenge, and I regard the matter as still outstanding. Ultimately I will only say this: The substance of Cavell's ideas resides in what he actually manages to do with them, for instance in his engagement with the various arts, and not in any programmatic intentions. Thus we see that the line between what could be called brilliant philosophy, and what would not be called philosophy at all, can be exceedingly thin. That, at least, is one lesson the work of Stanley Cavell teaches us.

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