

Conversations 8

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Feeling It

EDITORIAL COMMENT

The eighth issue of *Conversations* is open-themed. Nonetheless, the articles gathered here coalesce around issues of *feeling it*. This is perhaps not altogether anomalous as all good writing is in some capacity a matter of feeling. But beginning with Andrew Norris, we are invited to consider how Cavell's moods inflect not simply his writing, but from there, his world and possibly *the* world. Managing to maintain attachments to professional philosophy after explicitly describing the world in a mooded way is perhaps amongst Cavell's notable (even Heideggarian) achievements. Next, Brad Tabas reminds us that our place in the universe costs money, is expensive—and that philosophy requires coming to terms with a mood of cannibalism that accompanies the stark realization and possibility that my voice or mood *negates* another's. Philosophy or thinking or what have you quite possibly eats itself. Michael McCreary notes a similar mood of failed catharsis in Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* and by so doing, provides a sorely needed Cavellian commentary on the possibility of failed expression, of what happens when the costs of mooding the world results not in ordinary transcendence, but extraordinary rage. Charles Djordjevic looks to what one might perhaps term a Cavellian sense of "play" to deal with extraordinary railings. The move to take language on holiday, that is, is not indicative necessarily of Wittgensteinian error but perhaps a type of philosophical therapy afforded to human beings by virtue of (a Kierkegaardian) faith. Lucas Thompson more subtly exposes the lack of faith in contemporary treatment of Cavell's philosophical work on film, exposing the naïve belief that takes Cavell to be naïve for not engaging forcefully enough in "ideology critique"; not only does Thompson champion Cavell's genre of remarriage comedies in rebuttal, but he ably adds another film to the mix. Lastly, a welcome and spirited addendum concludes the issue in dialogic exchange. Two recently published Cavellian authors, Rex Butler and Catherine Wheatley, discuss how Cavell might be bet-

ter integrated into a wider, more contentious, and certainly more mooded, world of gender and identity politics.

With all best wishes,

SÉRGIO AND AMIR

1. The Mood of the World

ANDREW NORRIS

The phrase, “epistemology of moods,” appears in Stanley Cavell’s writings in the late 1970’s, as *The Claim of Reason* is published and Cavell begins the direct engagement with Emerson around which his work will pivot for the rest of his career. Indeed, it is as an “epistemologist of moods” that Emerson first appeals to Cavell in his own right, and not as merely a “second-hand Thoreau.”¹ The phrase is an odd one. Most of us would not think that knowledge and mood are connected in the way it suggests: my foul mood may make it difficult for me to *concentrate* on, say, my taxes, but it does not appear to otherwise affect my ability to *know* how much or how little I owe—and the same could be said of Sextus’ honey, Descartes’ ball of wax, Price’s tomato, and Clarke’s block of cheese. The oddity of the phrase is, if anything, even more marked when coming from Cavell: though Cavell is deeply interested in questions of *self-knowledge*, and of our ability to speak for one another and in that sense *know* one another, he is not an epistemologist; and when he writes of epistemology he often uses phrases like *traditional epistemology* or *classical epistemology* that distance him from it. Cavell does not share the traditional epistemologist’s interest in determining what, if anything, might warrant our claims to knowledge of the empirical world or the existence of “other minds”; and “the truth of skepticism” that he announces and explores is not the truth of the claims of the epistemological skeptic regarding such matters. While the epistemologist seeks to assure himself of the *certainty* of his knowledge, Cavell seeks to understand our *disappointment* with the knowledge we have.² What, then, does Cavell mean by this phrase? What is the epistemology of moods?

The piece in which this phrase first appears is entitled “Thinking of Emerson,” words Cavell repeats in the first line of the essay. It soon becomes apparent that thin-

1. Cavell, “Thinking of Emerson” and “An Emerson Mood,” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11, and 26 and 28.

2. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 44.

king of Emerson entails much more than having thoughts about him in the usual sense of the term. It is in this same essay that Cavell first notes the uncannily close relation between Emerson's line from "Experience," "Always our thinking is a pious reception," and the concluding line of Heidegger's "Question Concerning Technology," "questioning is the piety of thinking."³ For both, thinking is a kind of thanking, "a thanking," as Cavell puts it, "for the gift of thinking, which means for the reception of being human."⁴ "Possessing a self," he goes on to write, is "an act of creation, . . . the exercise not of power but of reception."⁵ The essay "Thinking of Emerson" is thus announced as an expression of gratitude and a moment in the ongoing reception of its author's humanity—one that is intended or hoped to make a similar contribution to the reader's own.

It is in this context and in this way that Cavell thinks of Emerson and of Emerson's own thinking of moods and knowledge. The role of Heidegger is plainly important here, especially given *Being and Time's* discussion of *Stimmung* or mood; and Cavell dedicates the piece to the members of a graduate seminar he had taught that year on Heidegger's later writings. But Heidegger—whose wholehearted dismissal of epistemology in and after *Being and Time* is well known—appears in a setting established by Kant; and, like a surprisingly large amount of Cavell's work, this study of mood and reception is part of an ongoing engagement with Kant's critical thought, in particular its understanding of finitude and experience.⁶ As Cavell indicates, it was on this ground that he initially dismissed Emerson in favor of Thoreau: "The most significant shortcoming among the places [*The Senses of Walden*] mentions Emerson is," he writes, "its accusing him of 'misconceiving' Kant's critical enterprise" as Thoreau had not. Cavell had proposed that Thoreau's line, "The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions" be taken as both invoking Kant and going beyond him, suggesting

3. Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," 15.

4. *Ibid.*, 16.

5. *Ibid.*, 17. Among other things, this raises questions about what the *experience* is like of *reading* an essay of Emerson's—or of Cavell's.

6. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (SUNY Press: New York, 1996), 190 and 210; cf. 56-8. I pursue this in Norris, "Skepticism and Critique in Arendt and Cavell," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 44, no. 1 (2018): 81-99. Concerning Heidegger, Cavell writes, "The only philosopher I knew who had made an effort to formulate a kind of epistemology of moods, to find their revelations of what we call the world as sure as the revelations of what we call the understanding, was the Heidegger of *Being and Time*. But it was hard to claim support there without committing oneself to more machinery than one had any business for." Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," 11. Some will be tempted to equate Cavell's epistemology of moods with Heidegger's account of attunement. Other will emphasize Cavell's note that the "machinery" of *Being and Time* is, for better or worse, not his business.

“that the universe answers whether our conceptions are mean or magnanimous, scientific or magical, faithful or treacherous.” This is a word-for-word repetition of the second passage in *Senses of Walden* in which Cavell discusses the line he quotes from Thoreau, a fact that indicates Cavell’s confidence in his phrasing—a point to which we shall return. In the Emerson essay he goes on to suggest that this implies

that there are more ways of making a habitable world—or more layers to it—than Kant’s twelve concepts of the understanding accommodate. But I make no effort to justify this idea of a “world” beyond claiming implicitly that as I used the word I was making sense. The idea is roughly that moods must be taken as having at least as sound a role in advising us of reality as sense experience has; that, for example, coloring the world, attributing to it the qualities “mean” or “magnanimous” may be no less objective or subjective than coloring an apple, attributing to it the colors red or green. Or perhaps we should say: sense experience is to objects what moods are to the world.⁷

What, in this Kantian context, is the force of this comparison between moods and colors? In the first *Critique*, Kant advances—on the empirical but not the transcendental level—a version of the empiricist distinction between primary and secondary qualities, according to which space is the only “subjective representation related to something external that could be called *a priori* objective.” What Kant refers to as the empirical “object in itself” has spatial properties, but it is no more colored than it is pleasant or unpleasant to see: “Colors are not objective qualities of the bodies to the intuition of which they are attached [but rather] mere alternations of our subject, which can be different in different people.”⁸ Though I can truthfully say both that I *know* that the vase is a certain color and that I *know* that it is a certain shape, and though I say both on the basis of my own *experience*, the claims and their referents are categorically distinct.⁹ If moods play a role analogous to colors in our experience of the world, something like

7. Cavell, “Thinking of Emerson,” 11.

8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), A45/B 62 and A28-9/B44-5.

9. In the third *Critique* my aesthetic pleasure in the vase will be shown to be (potentially) *public* rather than private; but this will not be a matter of knowledge.

this will be true of them as well: whatever epistemic status they have, it will not be that of sense perception. Significant differences between moods and colors will of course remain: moods vary not just across different people, but across time, as one's mood changes over the course of the day, the week, the month. And this variety is obviously much greater than that found with colors, where (as Cavell reminds us) what is seen as red by one person is seen as a green or brownish yellow by another, and what some see as yellow or red are seen by others as pink. Finally, where our color experiences tell us something about what *type of subject* we are—"normal" or "color blind"—moods tell us at once something about who and how we are as *individuals*.

What of the idea that moods "color," not our experience or knowledge of discrete objects like Descartes' block of wax, but the world as a whole? As a student of ordinary language, Cavell would have been familiar with the discussion of mood in Gilbert Ryle's 1949 classic, *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle notes that though we speak of *feeling* moods like depression, and though the avowal of neither moods nor feelings could conceivably be supported by evidence, moods are not feelings, and do not, for instance, come and go as quickly as do feelings (of, say, delight or surprise). Nor are they motives, which can be combined, as when I seek desperately to say something not only plausible but also deeply impressive to my audience. As Ryle puts it, "Moods monopolize [...]. Somewhat as the entire ship is cruising south-east, rolling, or vibrating, so the entire person is nervous, serene, or gloomy. His corresponding inclination will be to describe the whole world as menacing, congenial, or grey. If he is jovial, he finds everything jollier than usual; and if he is sulky, not only his employer's tone of voice and his own knotted shoe-lace seem unjust to him, but everything seems to be doing him injustices." And of boredom, Ryle—who sympathetically reviewed Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* in 1929—writes, "it is the temporary complexion of the totality."¹⁰

As an account of mood in general this is slightly exaggerated. I at least sometimes experience a kind of irritability in which I am painfully well aware that the problem is not with the world, but with *me*: the irritating quality of the knotted shoelace is not evidence of—not a manifestation of—anything about the world other than the fact that *I* don't seem to fit in it. A similar gap between self and world characterizes certain giddy moods of affection, or moods in which one feels disposed to be cruel.

10. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1949), 99-100 and 104.

The world is not feeling loving or mean; *I* am. But, that said, it is surely true that, for many moods, what Ryle writes is quite true, and quite widely accepted. When one is depressed, the world itself seems a depressing place, and every sad-eyed dog and awkward loner at a dirty bus stop are evidence of its dreary emptiness.¹¹ If, then, Cavell feels it necessary to insist that “sense experience is to objects what moods are to the world,” he must mean something *different* by this than what Ryle had already said.¹² It is not just that “I am inclined to describe the whole world” in terms that match my mood, nor just that my general mood will color my experience of particular events like greeting my dean or tying my shoes. But what then does Cavell mean? In what way do moods color the world?

The moods of which Ryle writes are those of being sulky, bored, cheerful, happy, and depressed. This may reflect his concern with comparing and contrasting moods and feelings, like those of being tickled or pinched. But it is, in any event, consistent with the common assumption that moods are (just) subjective states. Something in the world may set me off, and throw me into another depression or fit of the sulks, but they do not, strictly speaking, *cause* the depression or the sulks, and the same kind of things may well leave me quite unmoved at other times. At least some of Cavell’s examples are of what he describes as *conceptions* of the world as mean or magnanimous, scientific or magical, faithful or treacherous.¹³ Not only are these terms “attributed to” the world and not the person; none of them even refers directly to a subjective state in the way that *happy* or *sulky* does. Cavell says these *conceptions* contribute, like Kant’s *concepts* of the understanding, to the making up of a habitable world—an idea he notes in turn that he has left unclarified. These conceptions are, we can conclude, not just a matter of what one feels; or, perhaps better, they are no more one’s own feelings than the concepts of unity and plurality are one’s own concepts. But this is not to say that we, whoever *we* are, share these conceptions and these concepts in the same way or for the same reasons.¹⁴

11. For the rest of this essay, when I write of *mood* it is to this sort of world-disclosive mood that I refer.

12. Cavell is not an author who relishes repeating commonplaces, and he will court paradox to avoid doing so.

13. The emphasis upon moods that function as *conceptions* explains why Cavell writes of seeing Emerson’s “Experience” as being “about the epistemology, or say logic, of moods.” Cavell, “Thinking of Emerson,” 11.

14. Though I will not always share your mood, we share a common language and repertoire of moods, not all of which we experience in quite the same way or to the same degree.

How, in this context, might one begin to clarify the idea of a habitable *world*? Kant distinguishes between two ways of thinking about the world: as “the mathematical whole of all appearances and the totality of their synthesis,” on the one hand, and as what he terms the *Weltganzen selbst* or “*world-whole itself*” on the other. The first is the world of objective experience as analyzed in the first *Critique* in terms of reality, substance, causality, and necessity. The second, in contrast, cannot be so understood, as it is not “an object of possible experience.”¹⁵ It is, however, (relatively but not absolutely) implied by the first, as the infamous *thing-in-itself* is implied by the phenomena we experience. Indeed, as the thing-in-itself could be distinguished from the *world-whole itself* only by being particularized by concepts of the understanding which by definition do not apply to it or “make it up” in a determinate, schematized fashion, the two could be said to name the same non-*thing*. Such, at any rate, appears to be Cavell’s assumption when he writes, “The idea of the thing-in-itself is the idea of a relation in which we stand to the world as a whole, call it a relation to the world’s externality [...] *a world apart from me in which* objects are met.”¹⁶ The difficulty of clarification here is obviously quite real. If moods in Cavell’s sense of the term concern the *world-whole itself*, and not the experience of phenomena within the world, such as my lonely irritability or Price’s tomato, they are no more “objective” than they are “subjective.” They somehow express both the knower and the known in an experience that exceeds the “empirical cognition” (*Erkenntnis*) with which Kant defines *experience*.¹⁷ But what kind of experience is this that is not known?

15. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason/Kritik der reinen Vernunft 2*, A418/B446 and A676-7/B704-5: “Denn, da kann ich das Dasein dieses Dinges niemals an sich selbst annehmen, weil keine Begriffe, dadurch ich mir irgend einen Gegenstand bestimmt denken kann, dazu gelangen, und die Bedingungen der objektiven Gültigkeit meiner Begriffe durch die Idee selbst ausgeschlossen sind. Die Begriffe der Realität, der Substanz, der Kausalität, selbst die der Notwendigkeit im Dasein, haben, außer dem Gebrauche, da sie die empirische Erkenntnis eines Gegenstandes möglich machen, gar keine Bedeutung, die irgendein Objekt bestimmte. Sie können also zwar zu Erklärung der Möglichkeit der Dinge in der Sinnenwelt, aber nicht der Möglichkeit eines *Weltganzen selbst* gebraucht werden, weil dieser Erklärungsgrund außerhalb der Welt und mithin kein Gegenstand einer möglichen Erfahrung sein müßte.”

16. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 107. Following Cavell, I gloss over here numerous questions regarding the relation between the regulative ideas of pure reason and the problematic hypothesis of the *ding an sich*, which Kant refers to in both the singular and the plural; and my reference to *implication* here is quite loose, if, again, in line with Cavell’s own approach. On Cavell’s use of Kant, which is both freer than any Kantian scholar would tolerate and more attentive than a casual reader might credit, see Paul Franks, “Cavell, Fichte, and Skepticism,” *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006). It is noteworthy that both Franks and Paul Guyer, the leading policeman among Kant scholars, wrote their dissertations under Cavell’s direction.

17. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft 2*, B147.

As I have noted elsewhere, when Cavell writes of the truth of skepticism, the object of that truth is not a particular thing like Price's tomato or Descartes' ball of wax, but rather *the world*.¹⁸ Here I would add that, in perhaps his most famous formulation of this truth, in *The Claim of Reason*, he echoes the Kantian phrase, the *world-whole itself*: "the truth of skepticism or what I might call the moral of skepticism [is that] the human creature's basis in *the world as a whole*, its relation to the world *as such*, is not that of knowing, anyway what we think of as knowing."¹⁹ The *totality* or *whole world* of which Ryle writes is nothing more than the aggregate of the objects of our experience; and it is not itself the object of either skepticism or knowledge, Ryle sharing Heidegger's lack of interest in either epistemology or skepticism.²⁰ Cavell's *world as a whole as such*, in contrast, is the object or subject of the truth of skepticism. In "Thinking of Emerson," the idea that we need to "reconceive" skepticism is linked with reception, as noted above, and with *acceptance*: "It is true that we do not know the existence of the world with certainty; our relation to its existence is deeper—one in which it is to be accepted, [...] received, [...] acknowledged."²¹ Indeed, it is acceptance rather than acknowledgment that is associated with the world in Cavell's first formulation of this idea in "The Avoidance of Love": "[W]hat skepticism suggests," Cavell writes, "is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be accepted; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged."²²

These formulations encourage the assumption of many of Cavell's readers that the experience of the world of which he writes is an emotional or personal commitment quite distinct from knowledge or cognition. Just as the good friend *accepts* the limitations of her friend, so the good Cavellian *accepts* or *acknowledges* the reality of a world that she cannot know. On this account, acknowledgment is to the unknowable aspect or "back side" of the known world what acceptance is to the unlovable aspect of the beloved friend. As tempting as this account is, it fails to bring out the differences between Cavell's analysis of skepticism and of epistemology more broadly

18. Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 190.

19. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 241 (emphases mine).

20. Cf. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 317.

21. Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," 16.

22. Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 324.

and that of a skeptic (that is, almost any skeptic) who admits that he cannot *live* his skepticism—someone like Hume, who argues that though neither causality nor the self can be objects of our knowledge, for *practical* purposes, while actually *doing something* like playing backgammon, we must live as though they were. Moreover, while this reading is supported by some of Cavell's formulations, it neglects the final line of the passage we just quoted from *The Claim of Reason*: "not that of knowing, *anyway what we think of as knowing*."²³ And in one of the first essays Cavell writes after the Emerson pieces under consideration here, he emphasizes, "I do not propose the idea of acknowledging as an alternative to knowing, but rather as an interpretation of it, as I take the word 'acknowledge,' containing 'knowledge,' itself to suggest (or perhaps it suggests that knowing is an interpretation of acknowledging)."²⁴ Acknowledgment cannot be hived off so easily and completely from knowledge.

But this raises almost as many problems as it forecloses. A knowing that is not knowing sounds suspiciously like Kant's thing-in-itself, a thing that is not a thing. *The world* is not known *as the traditional epistemologist conceives of empirical knowledge*, or experienced *as Kant conceives of objective experience*, but it is nonetheless known and experienced after its fashion. Our proper relation to the world-whole itself is not *exactly* like our knowledge of the tomato or the ball of wax, but *very like it*.²⁵ And, indeed, in a long footnote in *The Senses of Walden* attached to the discussion of Thoreau and Emerson's relations to Kant that we have been discussing, Cavell writes, "A thing which we cannot know is not a thing. Then why are we led to speak otherwise? What is the sense that something escapes the conditions of knowledge? It is, I think, the sense, or fact, that our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing (understood as achieving certainty of it based upon the senses). This is the truth of skepticism."²⁶ This can make it sound as if acknowledgement—our proper relation to the *world-whole itself*—is knowledge, just not *certain* knowledge based upon *the senses*. And this interpretation, too, has been advanced of Cavell's idea of the truth of skept-

23. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 9, 241; cf. 47.

24. Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life (Toward Thoreau and Emerson)" *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 39.

25. Note that it is precisely on account of the limitations of such formulations that Hegel distinguishes between the false and the true infinite, an analysis he applies to the relation between the whole (the world) and the objects in it. Cf. Herbert Schnädelbach, *Hegel zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1999), 14-17; on Cavell and Hegel, see Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*, 246-247.

26. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 106-7.

ticism. And here, too, what is original and fruitful in Cavell's thought is lost, and he is left sounding like one of his predecessors—here perhaps Shaftesbury.

Cavell suggests that knowledge and acknowledgment *interpret* one another, not that they *supplement* one another, the one providing an intuitive (or affective) knowledge to round out the other's discursive knowledge.²⁷ But what kind of interpretation? Our troublesome phrase *the epistemology of moods* may help us here. As we have seen, Cavell uses this phrase to characterize the way mooded conceptions help make up the habitable world. In *The Senses of Walden* he characterizes this world as “a world apart from me in which objects are met,” noting that Thoreau registers this apartness by noting how *near* the world is to him.²⁸ The epistemology of moods is not the epistemology of tomatoes and blocks of cheese; but it is an epistemology nonetheless—that is, it makes a necessary contribution to our understanding and experience of our knowledge of such things. Since the world-whole itself cannot be known, (the non-knowing of) it must perform its epistemological function in the knowledge of what *can* be known. Its function is to color that world. As our relation to the world “is to be” one of acknowledgment, I take it that this coloring is the expression or manifestation of our acknowledgment. Cavell's claim is that the objects of our knowledge are known only within a world that must be acknowledged *in a mooded way*. Conversely, that world is nothing more than the context within which objects are so present to us—that is, it is itself nothing. Acknowledgement and knowledge are, on this account, quite inseparable; it is as conjoined aspects of our worldly life that they interpret or *serve* one another. Acknowledgment is not, as many readers of Cavell assume, something quite distinct from knowing, something *optional* that might be taken up after first reading *The Claim of Reason*, or *Gelassenheit*, or the *Daodejing*.²⁹

But why, one might ask, does it so often *sound* that way? Why does it seem as if the “moral claim” or fervor of Cavell's prose is directed at getting us to (begin to) acknowledge the existence of the world as we (should) accept the shortcomings of a

27. Crucial here is the fact that the objects of intuitive knowledge (e.g., the other person's feelings, the best strategy to adopt) are not inappropriate or impossible objects of discursive knowledge. They are both, as Kant would put it, within the “sphere” of the “field of experience.” Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason/Kritik der reinen Vernunft* 2, A762/B790.

28. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 107.

29. Note how this distinguishes Cavell from Heidegger, whose moods do not seem to be tied to knowledge in this way. *Stimmung* is also tied to *thrownness* in Heidegger, not (immediately) to *existence* and *futurity*.

friend?³⁰ The answer, I think, is that, as we now see, *acknowledgment is mooded*.³¹ If acknowledgment is the other side of knowledge, in so far as we experience (knowable) objects, we experience, *in some way*, mooded acknowledgment. The evident fact that we are not always aware of being in a world-disclosive mood (that is, of acknowledging the world) demonstrates that our experience is not always conscious, that *we do not always know (or feel) what we are experiencing*. In reviewing Emerson's response to Kant's limitation of knowledge (with the exceptions of our certainty in the moral law and the results of the critique) to the sphere of experience, Cavell writes, "Well and good, but then you had better be very careful what it is you understand by experience, for that might be limited in advance by the conceptual limitations you impose upon it, limited by what we know of human existence, i.e., by our limited experience of it."³² I take this to say *both* that we do not know what experience might prove to be possible for us, *and* that our experience of our (current) existence is limited—that is, that our experience of our lives as they stand, our experience *of our experience* in the widest sense of the term, is limited.³³ Bringing our experience to consciousness—awakening us to our lives, to ourselves—is at the heart of Cavell's effort "to cheer, to raise, and to guide" us.³⁴

This entails giving the existence of the world the only kind of proof that it can receive: "The succession of moods is not tractable," Cavell writes, "by the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity Kant proposes for experience. [...] The fact that we are taken over by this succession, this onwardness, means that you can think of it as at once a succession of moods (inner matters) and a succession of things (outer

30. Cavell, "Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow," *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005), 219.

31. Though, looking back, I have come close to saying this, this is a feature of Cavell's account that I at least have not seen or appreciated up to now. It was clear to me, in part because of helpful conversations in Frankfurt with Jan Müller, that acknowledgment is not something that one might *begin* for the first time. But I did not see until now that acknowledgment is as such mooded.

32. Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," 12.

33. We are, as Emerson says, partial versions of ourselves, not yet Man Thinking. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 84f. In one of his very finest passages, Cavell writes of the need of "consulting one's experience and . . . subjecting it to examination," a process that requires your "momentarily *stopping*, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust. The philosophical catch would then be that education cannot be achieved in advance of the trusting." This trust, he concludes, is "expressed as a willingness to find words for one's experience." Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (London: Harvard, 1981), 12.

34. Emerson, "The American Scholar," 95.

manners). This very evanescence of the world *proves its existence to me; it is what vanishes from me*. I guess this is not realism exactly; but it is not solipsism either.”³⁵ If my moods were only a matter of my subjective condition, Cavell’s account would amount to solipsism; and if they were only a matter of the objective facts of the matter, it would amount to realism. But in the account of the world of mooded acknowledgment they are, to put it as provocatively as possible, neither and both. Further, the proof of which Cavell writes is found *both* in my awareness of my mood *and* my forgetting of it, its *vanishing before me*. Indeed, the failure is fully as essential as is its overcoming in recollection: to be aware of the world-disclosive quality of my mood is to be aware of something that is not a constant feature of my experience of the objective world like, e.g., space and time, but that glows and dims as I am more or less aware of my mood—and that changes within that awareness as one mood gives way to another, sometimes with my indirect help.³⁶

I have noted that in *Senses of Walden* Cavell twice quotes Thoreau’s line, “The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions,” and that it is around this line that he positions the emergence to him of Emerson’s epistemology of moods.

35. Cavell, “Thinking of Emerson,” 13 (emphasis mine). The role of the world’s *vanishing* may point to the influence of Hegel, where *vanishing* is another name for *Aufhebung*; cf. Norris, “The Disappearance of the French Revolution in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” *The Owl of Minerva: Journal of the Hegel Society of America* 44, nos. 1-2 (2012-13): 37-66.

36. The inconstancy of mood that distinguishes its conceptions from the concepts of the understanding is manifest not only in my growing and dimming awareness of my being in a mood, but also in the rise and fall of *particular* moods. This rise and fall over time is something I receive, where reception has both an active and a passive component. While our moods are not entirely within our direct control, they are not wholly impervious to our influence. Over time, I have learned that accepting a sad or bad mood and giving it the time it needs is the best thing to *do* about it. Fighting or resisting it, pretending that it is not there, only makes matters worse. It is obvious that moods can become better and worse. But it is not obvious which moods are better when: as wonderful as it is, a cheerful, giddy mood is the wrong mood in which to listen to Shostakovich’s Fifth, or Coltrane’s “Alabama.” One cannot in a very basic way *hear* the music when one is so out of tune with it. The same is true for watching *Badlands*, or reading Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man*. It may also be the wrong mood in which to philosophize; as Cavell repeatedly suggests, there is a (at least one) *philosophical mood*. He writes in “An Emerson Mood” of the objection—which he raises at least three times in these essays—that it was easy for Emerson “with his connections” to strike the poses he did, “this is not my present mood, or I will not, if I can help it, call upon this mood.” Cavell, “An Emerson Mood,” 31. One can control to some extent the way one experiences one’s own mood—that is, one’s own experience. If mood or mooded acknowledgment is as tightly tied to knowledge as I have argued, one way of affecting our mood would be to *know* or to *focus on knowledge* in an inappropriate or unhelpful way. One might think here of the way someone’s insistent questions regarding the factual circumstances regarding the production of an artwork—a painting in a museum, or a piece being performed in a hall—can ruin one’s experience of the art. Or the way Lear’s demands for proof make it impossible for him to actually *hear* Cordelia. One way of summing up Cavell’s brilliant early work on other minds skepticism is to say that the Millian epistemologist’s focus on *knowing* to a certainty whether the person in pain is minded makes it impossible to *acknowledge* that pain in anything but a mode of dismissal and avoidance. But a more human response to that pain does not mean that one cannot know, and say one knows, that the other is in pain.

He silently cites it once more in “Thinking of Emerson”: “you can say,” he writes, that “the soul is solipsistic; surely it is, to use [a] critical term of Emerson’s, partial. This no doubt implies that we do not have a universe as it is in itself. But this implication is nothing: we do not have selves in themselves either. The universe *is* what constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions. It is what *can* be all the ways we know it to be, which is to say, all the ways we can be. [...] The universe contains all the colors it wears.”³⁷ Cavell emphasizes the *is* and the *can* here: The universe *is* what constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions. It is what *can* be all the ways we know it to be, all the ways *we* can be. The universe is not over and done, but in process, pregnant with the possible, *partial*, as we are. To acknowledge the world as *habitable* is to see that this is true of it—and of us. As is plainer when one speaks of *mood* than when one uses the more generic *acknowledgment*, neither the universe nor we can be seen as it or we are *once and for all*; and neither of us can be seen as we are now—becoming something we are not yet—in isolation from one another. I use the word *we* here to include the universe in response to Cavell’s use of the same word (*acceptance, acknowledgment*) to characterize my relation to the world and to the other with whom I share it.

Little surprise, then, that when Cavell first cites this line from Thoreau, he does so in the context of a discussion of how *Walden* undoes our myths about *fate*: “men [...] mythologize their forces, as they always have, project them into demigods, and then serve their own projections. [...] It is, you might say, their inability to trust themselves to determine their lives; or rather, their inability to see that they are determining them.”³⁸ This may sound like Feuerbach or Marx; it should also sound like Kant, who diagnoses Christianity to be a form of self-alienation in which we attribute the glory of our own moral nature to an alien deity.³⁹ What Cavell adds is that the al-

37. Cavell, “Thinking of Emerson,” 13. Cavell continues: “In ‘Circles,’ we are told: ‘Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides. That central life. . . contains all its circles. The universe contains all the colors it wears. That it can wear no more than I can give is a fact of what Emerson calls my poverty. (Other philosophers may speak of the emptiness of the self.)’” When the essay is reprinted in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* the final parenthetical remark is dropped. I suspect the reference to other philosophers is to Sartre. This would explain the remark being dropped, he having gone out of fashion, and no longer serving as a reliable shared reference. It would also confirm the interpretation above, the emptiness of the self in Sartre being a function of its negativity and orientation towards the future and the fulfillment of its “plan.”

38. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 97.

39. As is observed in Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 67-68.

ternative to this self-alienation is not knowledge and self-mastery—an enlightened moral culture, a leftist humanism, a communist proletariat—but recognition of the role mooded acknowledgment plays in our lives. Or, better, who argues that without attention to the latter our dreams of the former will serve only to condemn our present state, not to lead it to its transformation and fulfillment.⁴⁰ In this context is significant that Cavell's last references to Emerson as an epistemologist of mood in these essays are in made in regard to Emerson's suggestion that we must follow our *whims* or moods or the "call of our genius" if we are to overcome nihilism enough to muster "the heart for a new creation."⁴¹ Cavell reaches here back to Kant—who writes of the *world-whole itself* in connection with the idea of God's *creation* of the world—and to the beginning of Emerson's "Experience," where Emerson attributes our lethargy and our incapacity for "new creation" to the fact that "genius" gave us lethe to drink. It is, I think, no coincidence that "Experience" closes with a call for "the transformation of *genius* into practical power."⁴² As always in Cavell and Emerson, failure is not overcome, but transformed.

Let me close by noting a point at which Cavell seems to point beyond his own analysis, as if inviting us to speculate in his absence. In the section of *The Senses of Walden* on which I have focused, he praises Thoreau for "getting Kant right" but also moving beyond him in suggesting that the objects of our knowledge require "a transcendental (or may we say grammatical or phenomenological) preparation. [Thoreau's] difference from Kant on this point is that these *a priori* conditions are not themselves knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally; historically, Hegel had said."⁴³ The erudite Cavell takes an apparent misstep here: while Heidegger does write of the historical *a priori*, Hegel does not. For Hegel, the categories of the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* are, like those of form and content, only more bina-

40. In this context it may be helpful to note Cavell's diagnosis of the modern condition in *Disowning Knowledge*: "The issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. Our skepticism is a function of our now illimitable desire." Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3. The fact that mooded acknowledgment is close enough to emotion or feeling to be mistaken for it points to its ability to provide a break or redirection of desire that retains an affective element, and hence promises not to leave desire unsatisfied.

41. Cavell, "An Emerson Mood," 28 and 30 and "Thinking of Emerson," 16.

42. Emerson, "Experience," in *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 286 and 311 (my emphasis).

43. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 95.

ries that need to be overcome or “sublated” if we are to see our situation aright. But Cavell’s point is nonetheless valid: the idea of the historical *a priori* is the idea of an *a priori* that takes an *a posteriori* form. What is significant for our purposes is the considered manner in which the turn to Hegel—the turn from *empirical* to *historical*—changes the temporal register of the experience in question. Empirical discoveries can be made in the course of an afternoon in the woods; the same cannot be said of *historical* discoveries: though they may come to us suddenly, they require years, even ages before they arrive there. The grammatical or phenomenological accounts of the preconditions of their experience occurs on the level of both personal and cultural change. The latter is not a primary focus of the Emersonian texts on which Cavell concentrates, but it is one to which this passage directs our attention.

Given this, let us return once more to the terms which I have noted Cavell carefully repeats six years after first writing them: “the universe answers whether our conceptions are mean or magnanimous, scientific or magical, faithful or treacherous.” I suppose it is possible for an individual to experience the world as “scientific” and “magical.” But it is more natural to speak of a *culture* in these terms, as Max Weber does when, following Friedrich Schiller’s “Die Götter Griechenlands,” he characterizes modernity as a disenchanted, technological age.⁴⁴ I take Cavell’s implicit suggestion to be that Weber is discussing one of the *moods* of the modern world. This may seem a baffling suggestion: surely speaking of the agency or mood of the world is already speaking of it in magical terms, something the *Entzauberung* of the world ought to preclude. But, given Cavell’s evident ambition not to dismiss Kant but to go beyond him, perhaps there is a distinction to be made here like that between the empirical and transcendental which would allow one to at once deny that magical forces exist (in the world, in the forest) and nonetheless assert that one inhabits a (scientific) world that is (magically) mooded in Cavell’s sense of the term. For those of us who wish to limit the real to the play of Weber’s control through calculation, this would be a loss; but for the rest of us, perhaps not. For us, to recognize this as our

44. Schiller writes of an *entgötterte* nature, Weber of the *Entzauberung* of the world: “The growing process of intellectualization and rationalization [...] means that in principle [...] we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world.” Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. R. Livingstone (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 12-13.

mood and not our fate may release us from at least some of the despair that is Cavell's and Emerson's constant preoccupation—but do so without losing what is living in that despair.⁴⁵

45. For helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay I am grateful to the other participants at the conference “Democratic Affections: Film, Philosophy, and Religion in the Thought of Stanley Cavell” held in February 2019 at UCSB’s Center for the Humanities and Social Change.

2. Getting to the Heart of It: Cavell, Philosophy and What Matters

BRAD TABAS

The road that took me to philosophy was an attempt
to discover a way to write that I could believe.

CAVELL, *A Pitch of Philosophy*

Retrospections

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I was seated in cafés in Paris, intermittently employed as an adjunct professor, and engaged in a struggle to find my professional place and philosophical voice. I lived in this way for almost six years. At present I am a tenured professor at a prestigious French engineering school, seated at my desk and enjoying the sense of well-being and intellectual liberty that such a position provides.

I perhaps would not mention this but for the light that it sheds on the following pages. When I wrote them, my feelings regarding Cavell were mitigated. I admired or even idolized him as a writer of philosophy, and these pages follow Cavell's example on a voyage towards philosophical writing, taking heart from his courage and his "arrogation" of philosophical reason. Yet in my admiration there was also bitterness. Cavell, quoting Thoreau, "unblushingly publish[ed] [his] guilt," in the autobiographical work published as *Little Did I Know*. I credited him for this, but as he offered up examples illustrating the ways in which "the human race is an expensive race. It lives off others," I found that I could not help but regard him askance.¹ I found in his work an entanglement between Cavell's rise to a position of prominence among American philosophers

1. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 447.

and hurts and harms that were incurred along the way. I felt that *Little Did I Know* demonstrated ways in which not only his livelihood, but also his philosophical works, were “taken out of the mouths, or bodies, of others.”²

One example that particularly struck me was Cavell’s recounting of the treatment of Marshall Cohen, a friend and rival for a tenured post in the Harvard Philosophy Department. Cavell got the job as the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and General Theory of Value, while Cohen, a figure “made, and h[aving] made himself” for the position, did not.³ Cavell admits to having hesitated to accept his chair because Harvard had “mistreated a friend,”⁴ though in the end he just got on with it, commenting that worrying about such things could “drive one mad.”⁵ I understood this, but I felt a profound sympathy with Cohen. I had had the experience of seeing friends and former teachers denied tenure, and I recognized what a profound traumatism this was. For if a chair at Harvard represents money and stability, an office of one’s own and so forth, being denied tenure above all amounts to a repudiation of one’s voice. It amounts to the denial that one has something to contribute to philosophy. I felt this acutely, because at that time, I had not been denied tenure, but I was striving to find the courage to believe that I had something to contribute to philosophy, and I felt that the world was contriving to deny me even the right to attempt philosophizing. When I had applied for tenure-track jobs I had had but one interview, and that had not born fruit. I lacked even the baseline stability to write and research associated with a tenure-track job. In consequence, the cost of writing was ragingly apparent to me. As romantic as writing in Parisian cafés might sound, those rickety tables were but a poor excuse for an office, and in the economy of the existence that I then lived those moments of writing were the exception, not the norm. My quotidian consisted in shuttling back and forth between the campuses of the six different universities that employed me as a temporary worker, preparing as best I could for my overabundant course load while trying to spend “quality” time with my wife and newborn son, and (of course), sending in applications for that dream job which would permit me the time and place to write and think (a post like the one that I now enjoy.)

2. *Ibid.*, 447.

3. *Ibid.*, 392.

4. *Ibid.*, 415.

5. *Ibid.*, 446.

From this perspective, I regarded with some bitterness the marvelous expressive courage and confidence that I saw manifested in Cavell's writing, and which I excavated as being of exemplary value. But even now I am unsure whether the idea of speaking from the heart as a response to the paralyzes of skepticism is really something that one can do if one is not ensconced in a chair at Harvard, benefitting from what Cavell calls the "Saint Matthew Effect" ("To them that hath shall it be given.")⁶ In retrospect, there is probably some truth to this. This paper was rejected when years ago I first tried to publish it, and that is perhaps because if it begins in philosophy, it ends in fantasy or religion. It expresses the reasoned hope that all that one has really to do is trust in one's genius, willing oneself to speak from the heart, following the example set by Emerson, Wittgenstein and Cavell, and one will speak philosophy. Yet looking back at this paper from where I now stand, I still see some use in the journey that it endeavors to undertake. A question that animates the following is thinking about what counts as philosophy, if philosophy after Wittgenstein cannot be imagined to be legitimated as such by recourse to logic or to institutions. Today I am less engaged with this question than I once was, yet some version of it still matters to me.

I teach moral philosophy at an engineering school. In a pitch of Emersonian perfectionism I am constantly suggesting that my students ought to strive to become environmentally conscious actors, to master their consumption of energy, to think about recycling, to resist fostering consumerism, to think about the social and ecological consequences of technological innovations and so forth. Yet like Cavell, who wrote moral philosophy and yet foregrounded his own moral fallibility through his autobiographical writing, I feel myself to stand on shaky ground. I myself do not live sustainably, I myself do not always think about curbing the consequences of my actions. I live not only on the "bodies of others" but on the future of all. As a result, I often ask myself if I have the right to act or to speak in the name of that which I am aware that I know not how to accomplish. Because of this, and in this light, I find a new appreciation for Cavell, or at least for my reading of Cavell. For in a way—albeit in a different way—it is more difficult for me now to arrogate reason, to give public voice to what matters, than it was when I had no office, no chair of my own. For as I

6. *Ibid.*, 292.

write, here in my office, I recognize that I have come here in my diesel car, that I sit in a room heated by fossil fuels, surrounded by disposable plastic objects, that I receive a paycheck from the military industrial complex, that I type on a computer made with rare metals that were almost undoubtedly harvested with human blood. Moreover, though I tell others to craft their lives differently, I hardly know myself how to live otherwise. Yet despite these contradictions, or perhaps because of them—and because of Cavell, or at least of the reading of Cavell presented below—I stand by what I have written below.

1. Ordinary Language and the Paradoxical Grammar of “Philosophy”

Stanley Cavell, alongside Wittgenstein and Austin, took himself to have initiated a new way of doing philosophy, what he called “ordinary language” philosophizing. The procedure involved in this form of philosophizing is “looking at what we say.”⁷ To philosophize, we simply think about what we would say in certain situations and contexts. We are looking, to quote Cavell, for why we “grant any concept to anything, why we call things as we do.”⁸

The genius of this new form of philosophizing seems to be that it reveals that many of our philosophical problems emerge when philosophers use words in ways that depart from the ordinary. As Cavell explains “I understand Wittgenstein’s having described his later philosophy as an effort to “bring words back” to their everyday use (*Philosophical Investigations*, §116; my [Cavell’s] emphasis), as though the words we use in philosophy, in any reflection about our concerns, are away.”⁹ Taking this into account one might say that many of the skeptical problems that relate to philosophy are simply issues associated with word use, problems that emerge when language goes on holiday. Yet if this is so, it strikes me that the method of ordinary language philosophy creates another problem for itself.

7. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

8. *Ibid.*, 30.

9. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Kindle edn.

Say we flip the same procedure around and apply it to philosophy. If ordinary language philosophy is able to critique traditional philosophy for its abuses of ordinary language, this is perhaps because it has ceased to be and do what philosophy does. *Which is to say that ordinary language philosophy is not what we ordinarily call philosophy.* Wittgenstein seems to have felt the force of this concern. He is reported to have said that what he was “doing” when he was doing philosophy “was not the same kind of thing as Plato or Berkeley had done, but that we may feel that what he was doing *takes the place* of what Plato and Berkeley did, though it is really a different thing.”¹⁰

Does that mean that what he is doing is philosophy? Or is it not philosophy? And if it is something other than philosophy, then what is it? Does ordinary language philosophy, via its recourse to ordinary language, not condemn itself to unending skepticism with respect to its own status as philosophy, its own claim to reason? Cavell’s work addresses this concern. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell asserted continuity in the relationship between traditional and ordinary language philosophy, emphasizing the non-triviality of traditional philosophy from the viewpoint of ordinary language philosophy (he claimed that ordinary language philosophy must “inevitably remain internal to philosophy.”)¹¹ Yet his more elaborated response to the philosophical identity crisis seems to me to be what I call his theory of philosophical modernism.

2. Philosophical Modernism

Philosophical modernism understands philosophy not as a set of problems (as philosophy was understood by Russell) but as “a set of texts.”¹² The model for this conception is the history of literature and art. Michael Fried, a friend of, and influence on, Cavell, writes of painting that its historical unity happens not because works “deriv[e] from” one another, but rather because they “go on from” their predecessors.¹³ The unity of painting is thus a unity of ruptures and differences, of changing paradigms and states

10. This remark is actually G.E. Moore’s paraphrase of Wittgenstein. See: G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Routledge, 2014), 304-5.

11. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 166.

12. Cavell, *Must We Mean What we Say?*

13. Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1965), 11.

of incommensurability (to borrow terms from Thomas Kuhn, who himself strongly influenced Cavell's understanding of history). In the same way, a work of philosophy would be philosophy not because it continued the work of philosophy, but because it ceased that work and introduced something new and different, confusing and renewing our sense of what philosophy was. A philosophical work would be philosophy in the same way that Morris Louis' work was painting, because in being unlike previous painting it "broke through to what was possible" for painting.¹⁴ It is in the spirit of this modernist going on and breaking through that I understand Cavell's claim to have "courted a certain outrageousness" in his juxtapositions of philosophy and film (though surely a penchant for provocation can be detected nearly everywhere in his philosophical writing).¹⁵ Fried argued that "what is nakedly and explicitly at stake in the work of the most ambitious painters today is nothing less than the continued existence of painting as a high art."¹⁶ The same can be said true of philosophy for Cavell: each act of writing philosophy for him was a performance in making philosophy possible, an attempt to demonstrate, against all certitude, that philosophy still is. For this is what the loss of derivation in the history of philosophy demands. In philosophical modernity, there is no *internal reason*, no guarantee, that anything is philosophical. Or as Cavell more tamely put it: "what I am showing is that philosophy is to be understood, however else, aesthetically."¹⁷ Again restated: ordinary language philosophy is philosophy if people call it philosophy. Philosophical modernism opens up space for multiple forms of philosophical writing. It also opens up new vistas on philosophy's past, on the families of things that we would classify as philosophy. But what if they don't classify my philosophy as philosophy? Aren't there many art lovers who find Manzoni's *merda d'artista* to be nothing but crap? Are there not many philosophers, including some of Cavell's analytic philosopher peers, who would think something the same of *Little Did I Know* and even the rest of Cavell's oeuvre, with the possible exception of the first few recognizably "philosophical" essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Can, and should, ordinary language philosophy address this?

14. *Ibid.*, 13.

15. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 13.

16. Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 142.

17. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 14.

3. Philosophy and Confession

Cavell, at least, does. His work almost always includes a self-conscious pitch for its own status as philosophy. One of these pitches stakes a claim for the idea that philosophy and autobiography can be performed as “dimension[s] of the other.”¹⁸

Cavell’s pitch for this form of philosophy in *The Claim of Reason* is as breathtaking as it is tradition-shaking:

But if the child, little or big, asks me: Why do we eat animals? Or Why are some people poor and others rich? Or What is God? Or Why do I have to go to school? Or Do you love black people as much as white people? Or Who owns the land? Or Why is there anything at all? Or How did God get here?, I may find my answers thin, I may feel run out of reasons without being willing to say “This is what I do” (what I say, what I sense, what I know), and honor that.

Then I may feel that my foregone conclusions were never conclusions that *I* had arrived at, but were merely imbibed by me, merely conventional. I may blunt that realization through hypocrisy or cynicism or bullying. But I may take occasion to throw myself back on culture, and ask why we do what we do, judge as we judge, how have we arrived at these crossroads. What is the natural ground of our conventions, to what are they in service? It is inconvenient to question a convention; that makes it unserviceable, it no longer allows me to proceed as a matter of course; the paths of action, the paths of words, are blocked. “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture’s criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture’s words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets me.

18. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), vii.

This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. It is also the description of something that we might call education. In the face of the questions posed in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoreau...we are children; we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy. In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups.¹⁹

There are so many threads here as to threaten to make any attempt at summary burgeon into a treatise on Cavell's philosophy as a whole. Yet to parse these lines briefly, we might say that philosophy for Cavell emerges out of a lived encounter with the questioning other, with the child, and out of the questions that they ask about the order of things. These questions bear on why things are the way they are, and that is to say why they are the way that one somehow feels they ought not to be. Philosophy seems to be born out of the realization that the answers which I have at hand, or that we have at hand, are not the right ones, but that they stand rather as excuses, obfuscations, hypocrisies. Philosophicality here is not based on truth or even knowledge, certainly not on the knowledge of any positive truth, but rather on a kind of revelation of the untruth of what we commonly and hypocritically accept to be truth. If we are to judge by the antecedents that Cavell cites—by and large figures that do not take themselves to be philosophers—philosophy is not about knowing but about confessing. Philosophy consists in saying what we believe, and also perhaps avowing that we are wrong, or that our claims are unfounded. To philosophize is to confess. It is a moral act, but its understanding of morality does not pass through any obedience to universal maxims or utility calculations. Without debunking such ideas, philosophy confesses the ways in which our best intentions fall short, but it nevertheless confesses the belief in trying despite failure. It may be striking to find Augustine and Luther on this list of philosophical antecedents, for one supposes that neither turned to philosophy but rather to scripture or God when confronted by the child. Yet there is also a sense in which we can see the going on from Augustine through to Cavell as a series of passages whereby the word, in the final instance the philosophical word, stands both at the beginning and the end of the confession, as if Augustine and Luther were

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

always already turning to philosophy when they turned to the word, without themselves or philosophy being attuned to this fact at the time.

4. On the Forms of Philosophical Life

Cavell calls *Little Did I Know* a “test of representativeness.”²⁰ He also has written that philosophy “concentr[ates] what human life disseminates at random, hazardously.”²¹ Cavell’s autobiographical works should thus be seen as concentrations, distillations of acts of representativeness, of people and acts illustrating the confession of philosophy. To take a term used by the medieval church to describe saint’s lives, Cavell’s autobiographical writings are and contain *exempla*. As in the tales of the early church, these are tales of passion, not of purity, illustrations of a devotion of what one believes is philosophy, a belief that sometimes leads to persecution and misunderstanding. The slings and arrows risked by a philosophical life find perfect illustration in a tale that Cavell tells of his colleague, Hans Meyerhoff:

A number of other students were already gathered there witnessing the event [a dispute between Meyerhoff, a professor devoted to the arts, and a teaching assistant, a specialist in philosophical logic]. As I approached the group the teaching assistant was saying, “We know now that every assertion is either true or false or else neither true nor false; in the former case the assertion is meaningful, in the latter case cognitively meaningless. If you go on saying that this line of Rilke is cognitively meaningful, I smile at you.” Meyerhoff was in evident distress. He would of course have heard roughly this positivist refrain before, but for some reason he had been drawn in a weak moment into an aggrieved effort to defend a work important to him on grounds that may or may not have been important to him. And this defense seemed at this moment, as similar moments have so often seemed to others, to demand that he deny what seemed undeniably true, however insufferably asserted, in this assault on his treasured convictions. To

20. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 6.

21. *Ibid.*, 448.

discover a different mode of response to such an assault became as if on the spot an essential part of my investment in what I would call philosophy.²²

Meyerhoff is presented as a victim of philosophy. The logical positivist teaching assistant expects philosophical truths (or the absence of philosophical truth) to have a certain logical form. Meyerhoff finds no “philosophical” way to deny the rightness of this expectation, and he feels lame in his insistence on the value of Rilke. As he fails, we can imagine the taunts and smirks of the crowd of philosophers surrounding him. We can imagine them circling like wolves waiting for the kill, brute beasts savoring the defeat of the other in the contest of wits that passed for philosophy on late-twentieth century university campuses. We can imagine them stocking away the lesson: never philosophize without the hammer of philosophical logic. Yet if Cavell’s writing these lines constitutes his response to this bloodthirsty horde, he pitches the camp of philosophy outside of logic, locating it rather in emotion and in narrative. In his failure to offer logical claims, Meyerhoff becomes a philosophical martyr in Cavell’s pages. We feel that he is a righteous example of the iron will to hold to philosophy at all costs. Yet when we cast about in search of what makes him right, when we ask ourselves what is cognitively meaningful about Rilke, we too find ourselves beggared for reasons, vulnerable to the attacks of the well-armed logic choppers. Yet we may recognize that Meyerhoff’s example, and that of Cavell too, is the way of philosophy.

5. The Public Language Argument

One way of understanding Cavell’s new picture of philosophy is to see philosophizing as engaged in the act of constantly seeking to test what I call the public language argument. This argument is a conceptual cousin to the “private language argument” that so long occupied Cavell’s attention. Brutally paraphrased, the private language argument claims that it is not possible to imagine a language that cannot be shared with others. But the denial of private language does not in fact mean that all of our speech acts are understood by the public. As Cavell writes: “nothing ensures that we will make and un-

22. *Ibid.*, 252-53.

derstand the same projections” but “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. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.”²³ Put otherwise, the public language argument claims that we can make public speech, in essence, say things in the ways that others feel that they should be said, but it does not guarantee that we do actually do this. Moreover, if undertaking to speak philosophy is to attempt to demonstrate the public language argument by providing an example, then each time we authentically philosophize we must speak with no more support than is given by this terrifying whirl of organism that is our form of life. Unlike Augustine, the ordinary language philosopher has no recourse to the consolation that he speaks the word of god; words whose universality is guaranteed by a transcendental guarantor. Unlike Rousseau, the ordinary language philosopher has no recourse to a secure certitude in the universality of man and reason. He or she cannot take it as a “philosophical datum” that he “can speak for society and that society can speak for him, that they reveal one another’s most private thoughts.”²⁴ Nor can the ordinary language philosopher be content with professing philosophy as usual, for this is all too clearly a form of discourse that has traded in true philosophy for the banalities that inspire a feeling of certitude. For example, divining what we should ordinarily say is unsurprising and ultimately meaningless when we seem to be following a mathematical or logical rule (most of us feel comfortable saying that “we” should say “12” when confronted with the series “3...6...9”). In the same way, we equally feel comfortable when we know what we should say is supported by strong institutional conventions, norms and expectations (I feel as certain that I am doing “normal” philosophy when I say “Kant” as when I say “I do” at my marriage). But we all know that when we really are prompted by the questions of the child, these kinds of procedures do not offer the answers that we need.

We all know that these are but flights from philosophy. I want to say that any time philosophical speech feels too certain and well grounded, this is *because* we are faking it. I suspect that our current sense of philosophy as consisting primarily in flights from philosophy stems from a trade. This is what philosophy has traded in or-

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

24. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 25.

der to become a trade, to become a profession practiced by philosophy professors.²⁵ But if we are not to fake it, then how are we to get ourselves to dare to philosophize? For it seems that all too many of us who have grasped the above aspects of philosophizing find themselves reduced to muteness, and they perhaps even find themselves pushed out of the trade: “I should think that every philosopher now has at least one philosophical companion whose philosophical ability and accomplishment he has the highest regard for, who seems unable to write philosophy.”²⁶

6. Speaking from the Heart

Cavell does not give us an answer to this question (how could he?). He does offer us an image—perhaps a noble lie—that can inspire us; can help us to get over the hump to philosophy. The figure that he gives us is that of the heart.

It is with the heart that *Little Did I Know* begins:

catheterization of my heart will no longer be postponed. My cardiologist announces that he has lost confidence in his understanding of my condition so far based on reports of what I surmise as symptoms of angina and of the noninvasive monitoring allowed by X-rays and by the angiograms produced in stress tests. We must actually look at what is going on inside the heart.²⁷

These lines may not sound as if they are articulating anything particularly philosophical. We encounter the heart in what seems like its most soulless variant, the heart as a biological organ. But there is nevertheless something more to these lines. Intimations of it emerge when Cavell writes: “we must actually look at what is going on inside the heart”; as if he, like the doctor, must make an examination. As if to suggest,

25. I am intentionally playing on the idea of trade here. The initial title Cavell wanted to give to his *A Pitch of Philosophy* was “Trades of Philosophy.” The word “trades” is a double entendre: referring at once to trade winds (to philosophy today according to Cavell, for he was called upon to “present an analysis of the problems and developments in my field of research and study” but also to the trade or profession of being a philosopher. I take him to be interrogating whether and what philosophy has traded to make philosophy into a trade, and whether or not a man who philosophizes for a trade can still profess to be a philosopher. See Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, ix and 4.

26. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*.

27. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 1.

faced with our own mortality, our fact of having a physical heart, we can, and should, look deep inside ourselves to find what ails us in our spiritual hearts. I find justification for this reading in one of Cavell's favorite lines from Emerson: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius."²⁸ One might say that the movement from the failure of the finite heart to the encouragement to speak from the heart, and so to speak philosophy in its fully confessional form is a kind of interpretation of this turn of phrase.

Elsewhere in Cavell's work we also find him concerned with the heart, generally following this Emersonian insight into the relationship between the heart and philosophical truth. Cavell writes of the person that has devoted oneself to perfectionism (to a life devoted to philosophizing as he understands it):

here there simply seems no room for doubt that the intuition of a higher or further self is one to be arrived at in person, in the person of the one who gives his heart to it, this one who just said that the great have been his delegates and who declares that "I" can one day, so to speak, be that delegate."²⁹

I want to say that according to Cavell's Emerson-informed sense of what he himself is doing, being a philosopher is precisely coextensive with giving one's "heart to it," of finding a way of voicing one's self that resonates with what we are willing to call our hearts.

In other contexts, Cavell aligns philosophy's failure to grasp the notion of ordinary moral discourse in terms of a loss of sensitivity to the heart. In *The Claim of Reason*, for example, he writes that professors of philosophy were taking "the heart out of statements to which we were attaching great importance."³⁰ In an early essay on Shakespeare, Cavell laments the "hardness" of our "hearts," a point that he returns to in a later text, suggesting that we need to cleanse "our imaginations of each other" and that this can only be done by "mend[ing] the heart of language in a heartless world."³¹ I take it that mending the heart of language amounts to nothing other than

28. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), Kindle edn.

29. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 161.

30. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 102.

31. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Kindle.

offering up more of the language of the heart to the world, what Cavell calls the “performative and passionate utterance”—or simply philosophy.

There is nothing novel in Cavell’s idea that truth must come from the heart, as we have seen the trope is Emersonian, but it is also much older. The association between the heart, courage, and autobiography is so old and so tight that it forms part of the etymology of the English language. The English word ‘courage’ is a derivation from the Latin word ‘*Cor*,’ or heart, while the verb ‘record,’ the act which is precisely undertaken while writing autobiographically, is itself derived from a Latin word containing ‘*cor*’: ‘*recordari*.’ Unsurprisingly, the heart is the font of Augustine’s confession.³² Perhaps more astonishing, and certainly more interesting to students of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* (which Cavell has occasionally suggested is a kind of commentary on Augustine), is Augustine’s location of the source of the human voice in the heart: “By making all sorts of cries and noises, all sorts of movements with my limbs, I desired to express my heart (*sense cordis mei*) so that people would do what I wanted.”(2009: 1.8) Without pretending to recount the long history linking Augustine to Emerson and Cavell, I want only to remark—keeping in mind that philosophizing involves calling forth my culture’s criteria—that the dean of all American philosophers, Jonathan Edwards, also based all of his philosophical work around the notion of the heart. For Edwards, the heart was the location where grace enters man, such that the moment of conversion which rendered one a Protestant saint was an affair of the heart, to be prepared for actively with the mind, but finally to be achieved passively, in the affections of the heart, and through divine grace.³³

There is, then, a long tradition of generating a certain kind of truth claim out of the heart, and if we may wish to discount this tradition as theological, we can at least consider seriously whether we might not wish to call this philosophy, and might not wish to try to speak philosophically from our hearts ourselves, if we recognize this to be part of the philosophical endeavor. But then again, the heart is but a figure. It is a trope, a metaphor. We can of course feel that it is the right metaphor. We can feel in it the courage to speak, to philosophize.

32. For a detailed account on Augustine and the heart (and indeed of all things heart related in the middle ages), see Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

33 On Edwards and the heart, see Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America 1720-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

7. Leaving the Woods

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves.³⁴

With these lines Thoreau progressed towards the close of his *Walden*; indicating his return from that higher life by the lake to the quotidian. I cite them because I have begun this revisiting of an old text with a near citation from Thoreau, and in closing it seems meet to return to him. But I also cite Thoreau in closing I want to mark my own sense of a return to a less apparently romantic form of life. In its way this text recounts a voyage to philosophy undertaken hand in hand with Cavell, a voyage that I might imagine as akin to a trip to Walden, symbolic of a search for a pure life, for something like philosophical purity. Whether or not I have gotten there, or contributed something to philosophy via my voyage, I leave it up to my readers to judge. Yet without saying that I have abandoned this quest, let me say that today what seems to matter to me as philosophy is not writing something that others count as philosophy. From my present perspective, I care about finding the courage to speak from contradiction. By contradiction I refer to that position in which we find ourselves in ordinary life, within that state of affairs in which we rarely feel that we live handsomely, and in those cases when we do live handsomely we find ourselves ready to admit that this is as much a function of moral luck as of moral fiber. I find precisely such a contradictory existence exemplified in the life of Stanley Cavell as it is recounted by Cavell. I find this life in contradiction and the skepticism that it engenders to stand at the core of what he exemplifies as counting as philosophy. To me today what matters not is speaking philosophy but daring to speak out despite our existential contradictions. I have evoked above a certain analogy between speaking for sustainability as a rhetorical situation and the challenge of proclaiming philosophy within the framework of ordinary language. To call upon others to strive for sustainable existence

34. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *The Writings of Thoreau* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), Kindle edn.

even when one knows one's existence is unsustainable is an effort that requires, in my sense, speaking from the heart. Is it right to call a moral discourse for a sustainable future "philosophy"? Perhaps not, but it is a struggle to extract from life, and to bring into words, that much maligned thing that we could call wisdom. This willingness to seek, and to strive to speak wisdom, seems consonant with the quest for philosophy as exemplified in Cavell's autobiographical writing, as far away from Cavell's own efforts as it might seem.

8. Thanksgiving

Before I close this essay, let me beg pardon of my readers. When considering my pitch for philosophy, my readers may most pertinently wonder why I have not endeavored to cite or engage with the many fine writings that have come out on Cavell. When I first wrote this article, it was nourished by work from Laugier, Conant, and Putnam. When I revisited this text, I consumed pieces by Gould and Moi, Johannsen and Dumm. These contributions to our reading of Cavell matter. I have not cited them, however, out of a desire to try to refuse institutional justification of my words as philosophy (in a professional or any other sense). As I wrote I wondered what we trade in philosophy in order to take part in the trade, and I thought that I would perhaps remove these niceties of the trade from the text as an experiment in philosophy. I wanted to consider whether these allusions to the institution actually encourage us to avoid the risk and burden inherent in daring to speak the philosophical word, though I recognize too that there is a certain arrogation, a certain reproachable arrogance, in this experiment. Nevertheless in our desire to test new things, we must not forget to give thanks, and not just to those who contributed great thoughts, but also to those ones who, like my colleague Darren Paisley, humbly helped with the little things like proofreading this text.

3. Knowing the Skeptic: The Underground and the Everyday

MICHAEL MCCREARY

Descartes may have produced the paradigmatic image of modern philosophy when he donned his winter dressing gown, settled into his favorite armchair by the fire, and began a private meditation by wondering whether the flame in front of him were anything more than a dream. Like most skeptical recitals, the force of Descartes' method arises through the mobilization of best cases for knowing; that is, through casting doubt on something so certain that one begins to question one's ability to know anything at all. By impugning precisely those axioms we held most assured, Descartes demonstrates philosophy's propensity to challenge our most fundamental assumptions, yet he simultaneously leverages the significance of the philosophical enterprise against more everyday or ordinary claims to knowledge, that *of course* the fire really burns. In doing so, Descartes opens up the possibility that a critic of skepticism will be more inclined to doubt the sanity of philosophical inquiry than to admit that the flame, or the greater external world, may be nothing more than a dream, or the conjuring of an evil demon. So the profundity or inanity of philosophy seems to turn on the whim of human temperament, and in particular, on my reaction to the idea that I may be mistaken about everything I claim to know.

In an early essay on "Knowing and Acknowledging," Stanley Cavell takes a deeply Wittgensteinian position with respect to the apparently competing claims of philosophy and the everyday. Cavell is specifically concerned with the temptation to (or the interpretation that Wittgenstein wishes to) dismiss the skeptic on the ground that his doubts are not ordinary—i.e., do not arise in the course of everyday life outside of philosophy—and therefore that the skeptic cannot possibly mean what he says when he confesses his inability to know. In Cavell's view, such attempts to repudiate the skeptic fail because the skeptic, himself a master of langua-

ge, knows as well as his critic that his doubts are not ordinary. In order to understand the skeptic's embrace of the metaphysical, Cavell invites his reader to get to know the skeptic, writing that, in all cases, the problem for the philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language "is to discover the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to his condition."¹ I intend to pursue Cavell's invitation, or instruction, to know the skeptic by exploring what it might be like to refrain from dismissing the skeptic's words as nonsense, and from casting him out of the society of the ordinary. Instead, I wish to offer a glimpse of the particular experience the skeptic is trying to express and to suggest why his position can be so devastating.

My investigation is composed of three parts. The *first* deals most directly with illuminating the skeptical experience; that is, with uncovering the considerations and circumstances that may deliver a human being to the point of making a skeptical proclamation. The *second* takes up the question of why the skeptical experience cannot be repudiated by an appeal to the ordinary. This will trace the everyday attempts to refute the skeptic on the grounds of his unusual way of life and the impossibility of his ideal of certain knowledge. The *third* imagines what an everyday response to the skeptic might look like if it cannot be one of repudiation. Throughout, my understanding of the ordinary perspective will be informed by the work of Wittgenstein and Cavell, whereas my exploration of the skeptical plight of mind will be developed through a reading of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. I will thus envision the everyday response to the skeptic in terms of a Wittgensteinian appeal to Dostoevsky's unnamed protagonist, affectionately known as the Underground Man.

The Skeptical Experience

In Dostoevsky's 1864 novella, the Underground Man positions the *Notes* as an "experiment" to determine whether it is "possible to be absolutely honest even with one's

1. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 240.

own self and not to fear the whole truth.”² His opening words seem to live up to the promise of providing an honest self-evaluation:

I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased. [...] I’m forty now. I used to be in the civil service. But no more. I was a nasty official. I was rude and took pleasure in it. After all, since I didn’t accept bribes, at least I had to reward myself in some way. (That’s a poor joke, but I won’t cross it out. I wrote it thinking it would be very witty; but now, having realized that I merely wanted to show off disgracefully, I’ll make a point of not crossing it out!) When petitioners used to approach my desk for information, I’d gnash my teeth and feel unending pleasure if I succeeded in causing someone distress. I almost always succeeded.³

Immediately following his coherent introduction, however, the Underground Man admits that he is full of conflicting feelings and doubts, which lead him to undercut his own confession. He throws his illness into question, claiming that he is “not even sure what hurts,” and admits that he lied about being a nasty, spiteful official. He concludes by collapsing both his claim to and denial of spitefulness: “Not only couldn’t I become spiteful, I couldn’t become anything at all: neither spiteful nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect,” demonstrating that he is ultimately unable to make a single substantive claim about his true character.⁴ Within the space of only a few paragraphs, the Underground Man’s diatribe becomes so contradictory that it provides its own best critique. The discerning reader quickly abandons the attempt to discover the “whole truth” about the Underground Man and instead turns their attention to the pathology behind the Underground Man’s alarming inability to sustain a consistent autobiographical narrative.

In his essay “Wittgenstein Underground,” Garry Hagberg attempts to make sense of the *Notes*’ constant fluctuations and contradictions by emphasizing the reflexive quality of the Underground Man’s writing, which is constantly surprised by and

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 2nd ed., trans. Michael Katz (New York: Norton, 2001), 28.

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 4.

reacting to its own motives, a feature Hagberg refers to as “writing-in-the-process-of-writing.”⁵ Stressing the fidelity of the *Notes*’ representation of the challenges inherent to the confessional genre, Hagberg claims that “Dostoevsky has shown introspection for what it is,” namely by depicting a man in the process of “working out” the complexities of his own self-understanding.⁶ While I certainly share the sense that the Underground Man is discovering and responding to his own motives as he writes, my dissatisfaction with this reading is that it overlooks the prominent possibility that the Underground Man does not develop any kind of self-understanding in writing his confession, but rather vacillates in the absence of purpose or progress until the end of the *Notes*, where his ramblings must finally be cut off by a fictional editor. Such a reading seems to neglect the elements of sheer futility and absurdity that plague the Underground Man’s attempt at self-reflection; it misses the possibility that precisely what the Underground Man is doing is *not* working anything out.

Bakhtin offers a competing explanation of the Underground Man’s constantly shifting motives by noticing that “the entire style of the *Notes* is subject to the most powerful and all-determining influence of other people’s words.”⁷ When the Underground Man suspects that his reader is beginning to empathize with his confession, for example, he immediately claims that he is actually vile and unworthy of compassion; when his admission of vileness begins to seem as though he is soliciting pity, he changes his mind altogether and claims to be quite pleasant and agreeable; when this agreeableness starts to seem as if he intends to amuse the reader, he insists that he is not really as cheerful as he seems. At one point, the Underground Man becomes so confounded by navigating his reader’s potential reactions that he denies altogether that his confession will be given to anyone to read, despite his explicitly addressing the reader throughout the work.⁸ The Underground Man’s obsessive attempt to sever all dependence from his reader effectively prevents him from giving a cohesive account of the self.

Wittgenstein and O. K. Bouwsma echo Bakhtin’s reading of the *Notes* in a 1950 conversation about the Underground Man’s tendency to anticipate and distance him-

5. Garry Hagberg, “Wittgenstein Underground,” *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 2 (2004): 381.

6. *Ibid.*, 385.

7. M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in Dostoevsky,” in Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 154.

8. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 28. See also Béla Szabados, *Ludwig Wittgenstein on Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity: Philosophy as a Personal Endeavour* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010) for more on the difficulty of carrying out the traditional autobiographical project.

self from his reader's reactions in order to ensure his confession's objectivity. Bouwsma summarizes their reaction when he writes, "No one can write objectively about himself and this is because there will always be some motive for doing so. And the motives will change as you write. And this becomes complicated, for the more one is intent on being 'objective' the more one will notice the varying motives that enter in."⁹ The generality of the claim that "*no one* can write objectively about himself" suggests that the maddening nature of the Underground Man's writing is not a contingent result of his psychological idiosyncrasies or his bizarre perversion of reason, but is rather an inevitable consequence of the terms of his experiment to tell the "whole truth." In sacrificing writing with a definite motive for the pursuit of absolute truth, the Underground Man's words fail to attain an everyday meaning, thereby rendering them meaning-less, what Wittgenstein might call nonsense.¹⁰ Ironically, the Underground Man's relentless demand for certainty is the cause of his maddening vacillation; his pursuit of the path of reason is precisely what has driven him underground.

Some may be inclined to interpret the Underground Man's dialogical relation with his reader as an ironic attempt to control how he is perceived, positing objective self-knowledge as a strategic ruse or red herring to evoke pity or some other form of acknowledgement on his own terms. However, I share Bakhtin's and Wittgenstein's understanding that the function of the Underground Man's dialectic is driving towards a genuine avoidance of, or autonomy from, his reader in favor of a commitment to universal reason. As Joseph Frank explores in "Nihilism and 'Notes from Underground,'" reading the Underground Man's confession as a parody of "all the implications of 'reason,' in its then-current Russian incarnation," stays true to Dostoevsky's critique of Chernyshevsky's rational egoism, explored in-depth in Part I of the novella.¹¹ Of course, the experience of reading Dostoevsky's work calls for the reader to acknowledge the depravity of the underground—we are, after all, invited to get to know the skeptic—but they do so only against the Underground Man's wishes, only by struggling to see through his tortured reflections.

9. O. K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein: Conversations (1949-1951)* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1986), 71.

10. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §43.

11. Joseph Frank, "Nihilism and 'Notes from Underground,'" *The Sewanee Review* 29, no. 1 (1961): 4.

What remains to be shown, however, if we are to know the skeptic, is that the Underground Man's longing for objectivity represents a general condition or wish for knowledge that anyone can understand, so that even if the Underground Man is mad, his madness represents a similar potential for madness in us. The wish for certainty in one's self-understanding is, I think, easy enough to comprehend. The Underground Man's paranoid avoidance of taking on any particular motive for writing reads as a move to assert his independence from his reader; to establish his own sanity for himself, on his own terms; to prove that others are inessential to the pursuit of reason and that truth does not stand in need of anyone's agreement; to suggest that the clarity of his own mind could withstand the doubts of another, of every other; to claim that another's indictment, or animosity, or approval, or infatuation, for example, cannot impeach the certitude of his own self-perceptions; to assert his own mind as the one thing that he cannot fail to know, and that the outside world cannot begin to imagine; to prove that he can totally free himself from bias, can set aside his own ambitions and insecurities, sympathies and torments, joys and fears, in short, that he can liberate himself from the amalgam of passions that impact everyday human life and obscure objective reality; to suggest, above all, that certain knowledge of the self is forever guaranteed, a kind of reverberation of Descartes' emergence from a state of total doubt by way of the *cogito*.

The Underground Man's fear of committing to any particular purpose for writing is compounded by his anxiety to choose any particular course of action. Immediately following the Underground Man's confession that he can become "neither spiteful nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man," he resolves to lead a solitary life in his underground hovel, claiming that "an intelligent man in the nineteenth century, must be, is morally obliged to be, principally a characterless creature."¹² With this resolution of obligatory characterlessness, the underground becomes a space for what the Underground Man calls "conscious inertia," by which he means continuous thinking and rethinking totally devoid of any final resolution, judgment, action, or choice, and we begin to wonder how a man who does not believe he has a character that stands in need of description can reasonably expect to proceed with an autobiographical project.

12. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 4.

The Underground Man explains the necessity of characterlessness among intelligent men a few pages later while discussing his inability to choose a particular course of action:

As a result of their limitations [fools] mistake immediate and secondary causes for primary ones, and thus they're convinced more quickly and easily than other people that they've located an indisputable basis for action, and this puts them at ease; that's the main point. For in order to begin to act, one must first be absolutely at ease, with no lingering doubts whatsoever. Well, how can I, for example, ever feel at ease? Where are the primary causes I can rely upon, where's the foundation?¹³

The Underground Man's incapacity for making choices in everyday life reads as an expression of his existential anxiety which stems from a sense of radical freedom; as a confession of the profound ethical dilemmas and the overwhelming array of choices that face ordinary human life; as a frustration with determining the right action to take under a state of ignorance; as an admission of fear in making a mistake, or making a wrong choice, or unintentionally harming another person, or of hurting his own pride; as an effort to shield himself from the possibility for tragedy that his actions may bring about; as a sign of horror or disgust with the prospect of staking his own subjectivity in the sacred ground once reserved for reason, of defining himself by something as arbitrary as the whim of his own will; as a resignation that any action that does not arise out of immovable principles is doomed to be meaningless, or banal, or otherwise unexceptional; as, most importantly, a feeling of being forever lost, or abandoned, in the endeavor to live everyday life under the comfort of absolute certainty.

The character's skeptical descent into the underground can therefore be traced back to the failure of these two, interrelated demands for certainty: the demand for a wholly objective account of oneself that can be expressed without taking on any particular motive or appealing to any particular audience, and the demand for acting only in accordance with absolute moral principles that cannot be rationally denied by anyone and that give peace to one's own internal doubts and hesitations. The power

13. *Ibid.*, 13.

of the Underground Man's position lies in his lucid portrayal of the temptations of the underground; that is, in his exhibition of the natural experience of skepticism, an experience that cannot be dismissed as nonsense or insanity, but rather that arises out of a general longing for certain knowledge we all can relate to. In this respect, Cavell's invitation to know the skeptic is revealed as an exercise in knowing oneself, as if skeptical doubts were with us all along, as if nothing could be more natural to human knowledge than the human disappointment with human knowledge, as if nothing could be more ordinary than the underground.

The Failure of Repudiation

While we can begin to glimpse the ordinariness, or naturalness, of the desire for certain knowledge motivating the underground condition, some commentators may still be tempted to leverage the everyday perspective in order to repudiate the Underground Man and his commitment to skepticism. Unlike the initial attempt to dismiss the skeptic as mad, these objections take the allure of the underground seriously, but go on to argue that there are good reasons to resist such destructive attractions. These objections are likely to proceed along two principal lines of argument: first, that the Underground Man should relinquish his skeptical position because of the repulsing consequences that follow from it, and second that he should abandon his wish for certain knowledge because, while a laudable ideal, it is impossible to attain in the course of everyday life. I wish to trace both the argument from consequences and the argument from impossibility and to demonstrate why they ultimately fail to resonate with the skeptic based on his own awareness of the everyday position.

To begin, the ordinary perspective may harbor certain misgivings about the unusual consequences of skepticism, as if visions of skepticism may seem sensible in the abstract, but immediately dissolve upon witnessing the alarming state of underground existence. And indeed, evidence for the precarious state of the Underground Man's life is not in short supply: he embarks on a years-long endeavor to bump into a stranger who offended him by failing to notice him in a tavern; when he becomes lonely and desires to speak with other people, he has to "adjust the urge to embrace all

humanity so that it occurred on Tuesday”¹⁴ because his only lasting acquaintance is only available to be seen on Tuesdays; he pays the prostitute, Liza, whom he had almost allowed himself to love, then runs after her when she rejects the payment and storms out, only to turn back and wonder, “Won’t I grow to hate her, perhaps as soon as tomorrow, precisely because I’m kissing her feet today? Will I ever be able to make her happy? Haven’t I found out once again today, for the hundredth time, what I’m really worth? Won’t I torment her?”¹⁵

The trouble with disputing the Underground Man’s skepticism by referencing his absurd existence, however, is that the Underground Man is already aware of his paradoxical consciousness, and he readily admits that the consequences of his doubts are poisoning his ability to act, even going so far as to call his conscious inertia “a disease, a genuine, full-fledged disease.”¹⁶ More generally, the difficulty in trying to educate or enlighten the Underground Man to see the depravity of his own situation arises because his dialogical obsession with anticipating his reader’s reactions, the same obsession that has driven him underground, has also allowed him to head off his critic’s potential objections, such that any attempt to rebuke his skeptical life, or to persuade him to vacate his underground space, has—much to our exasperation—already been taken into account. He reveals, for example, that he has been “listening through a crack” to hear the people in the ordinary world above ground critique his ignoble life:

“Isn’t it disgraceful, isn’t it humiliating!” you might say, shaking your head in contempt. “You long for life, but you try to solve life’s problems by means of a logical tangle. How importunate, how insolent your outburst, and how frightened you are at the same time! [...] You really want to say something, but you conceal your final word out of fear because you lack the resolve to utter it; you have only cowardly impudence. You boast about your consciousness, but you merely vacillate, because even though your mind is working, your heart has been blackened by depravity, and without a pure heart, there can be no full, genuine consciousness.”¹⁷

14. *Ibid.*, 41.

15. *Ibid.*, 91.

16. *Ibid.*, 5.

17. *Ibid.*, 27.

In this, the Underground Man demonstrates that he knows his position seems insolent and unreasonable to others, that he contradicts himself out of fear of resolving his vacillations, and that his claims to a superior intelligence are undermined by his inability to understand basic human emotions and his incapacity to love another human being. In spite of his confession of this skeptical disease, however, the Underground Man refuses to change his ways, appealing instead to his superiority and claiming that this is the only morally acceptable way of life for an “intelligent man.”

Exhausting the argument of skepticism’s dire consequences, the second line of argument that may occur to the skeptic’s everyday critic is that, while the Underground Man’s wish for certainty is a noble ideal, this desire is only intelligible *as a wish*, not as something we can reasonably expect to occur in the imperfect reality of everyday human life. This claim seeks to convince the Underground Man to renounce his demand for absolute certainty by demonstrating the impossibility of such an aspiration, so as to bring him back down to the ordinary by crushing his metaphysical dream. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein expresses a similar fascination with certain or objective knowledge that operates in the absence of any particular motive or purpose when he writes, “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal.” At the same time, however, Wittgenstein recognizes that a pursuit of certainty will only lead to a descent into underground vacillation, as he continues, “but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk.” He resolves: “We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!”¹⁸ In this, Wittgenstein contrasts the Underground Man’s conscious inertia in the underground, consisting of perpetual contemplation and deliberation in an idealized metaphysical space, with the friction of the rough ground, which suggests that the meaning or sense of claims to knowledge can only arise from within ordinary, practical contexts.

Disturbingly, however, the Underground Man is unfazed by the impossibility of his desire for certain knowledge and is fully prepared to accept the idea that his notes amount to utter nonsense. He expresses his disdain for deriving meaning from everyday use in a metaphor that compares the shelter provided by a chicken coop to that provided by a crystal palace:

18. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

Don't you see: if it were a chicken coop instead of a palace, and if it should rain, then perhaps I could crawl into it so as not to get drenched; but I would still not mistake a chicken coop for a palace out of gratitude, just because it sheltered me from the rain. You're laughing, you're even saying that in this case there's no difference between a chicken coop and a mansion. Yes, I reply, if the only reason for living is to keep from getting drenched. But what if I've taken it into my head that this is not the only reason for living, and, that if one is to live at all, one might as well live in a mansion?¹⁹

The Underground Man's refusal to be grateful for a chicken coop that keeps him dry from the rain mirrors his rejection of everyday human knowledge; he cannot shake the feeling that there has to be something more, something not merely workable, but something truly sublime. The crystal palace, then, represents the Underground Man's ideal of perfect or absolute knowledge—knowledge that does not sink so low as to serve a particular purpose or take on a specific motive, but rather knowledge that is objectively and inherently true. The Underground Man goes on to reveal that even the unreality of the crystal palace cannot deter his fantasy of certainty. He writes: "But let's say that the crystal palace is a hoax, that according to the laws of nature it shouldn't exist, and that I've invented it only out of my own stupidity, as a result of certain antiquated, irrational habits of my generation. But what do I care if it doesn't exist? What difference does it make if it exists only in my own desires, or, to be more precise, if it exists as long as my desires exist?"²⁰

When the Underground Man proceeds with the taunt, "Destroy my desires, eradicate my ideals, show me something better, and I'll follow you," we seem completely at a loss about how we might begin to eradicate his ideal of the crystal palace.²¹ The Underground Man's commitment to skepticism is not founded on the lack of an ordinary understanding about the underground's depravity or about the unfeasibility of the crystal palace, but rather made in spite of such acknowledgements. Our inability to convince the Underground Man to vacate his miserable underground space serves as a haunting reminder of our inability to justify our own lives, forces us to

19. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 25-26.

20. *Ibid.*, 26.

21. *Ibid.*

confess that we have no fact or thesis to prevent ourselves from succumbing to an underground fate, and obliges us to prove that our commitment to the ordinary is not merely the result of our being fools.

The Everyday Response

We have seen that the everyday cannot repudiate the skeptic by dismissing his position as nonsense (because we, too, can understand the human longing for certainty that leads to his underground existence), or by pointing to the bizarre nature of the underground life and the impossibility of the ideal of certainty (because he, too, can understand that his doubts and his life are not ordinary and that his idealism may be no more than a dream). In doing so, we have been working towards the idea that the skeptical and the everyday positions cannot be distinguished by making observations about one or the other knows—they are both masters of language, and, moreover, have been listening through a crack to understand the other's concerns. But so far we have concentrated primarily on what the skeptic knows, and have yet to explore the everyday characterization of and response to the threat the skeptic has posed.

For the Underground Man, the absence of certain knowledge seems to destroy everything interesting, and he positions everyday claims to knowledge as a kind of blissful ignorance that allows us to go on with our meaningless lives. He writes: "Either a hero or dirt—there was no middle ground. That was my ruin because in the dirt I consoled myself knowing that at other times I was a hero, and that the hero covered himself with dirt; that is to say, an ordinary man would be ashamed to wallow in filth, but a hero is too noble to become defiled; consequently, he can wallow."²² In his eyes, the incapacity for leading a recognizably human life, surrounded by dirt in the underground, is merely a sacrifice made in homage to the higher ideals of reason and objective truth. The assumption here is that one cannot fail to know the human conventions that govern ordinary life, but that skepticism is a way of going beyond conventionality, of rising above the everyday to a more mature or profound state of knowing. We can imagine, then, how the dynamics would change if we could show

22. *Ibid.*, 40.

that the skeptic's everyday critic knew what the skeptic knew—that is, if we could demonstrate that the everyday response could somehow accommodate the skeptical threat, rather than appearing as some kind of provisional or naïve sort of knowledge exempt from, or prior to, the skeptical experience.

In his notes compiled in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein provides an effective foil for Dostoevsky's "intelligent man" when he writes, "The reasonable man does not have certain doubts."²³ Wittgenstein demonstrates the necessity of foregoing certain doubts in the course of everyday life when he imagines, for example, what must be assumed in order to play a game of chess: "When I am trying to mate someone in chess, I cannot have doubts about the pieces perhaps changing places of themselves and my memory simultaneously playing tricks on me so that I don't notice."²⁴ In effect, Wittgenstein's establishes that the reasonable man's ability to doubt his own strategy, or to admire his opponent's mettle, or to enjoy playing the game, to find meaning in it, rests on his ability not to doubt the possibility, if we are to grant it that title, that the pieces are spontaneously changing places of themselves. Wittgenstein thus insists that life for the reasonable man, including his capacity to doubt, is contingent on his taking some things for granted, writing that, "If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put."²⁵

Wittgenstein anticipates the skeptic's reaction to the reasonable man in the *Investigations*, in what is perhaps his most direct confrontation of the skeptical disappointment with human knowledge, when he writes: "But if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in the face of doubt," to which he replies from his own perspective: "They are shut."²⁶ The beauty of Wittgenstein's everyday response to skepticism is that he is able to admit the skeptic's thesis that human knowledge may never achieve absolutely certainty, but he also refrains from making the opposite mistake of dwelling on that fact, of not getting past it, of trying to cover it up. As Cavell explains, living in the face of doubt is not the same as living in the absence of doubt: "It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the *threat* of skepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with

23. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §220.

24. *Ibid.*, §346.

25. *Ibid.*, §343. See also Cavell's chapter "Rules and Reasons," in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), for example, the role of rules in baseball, 295-296.

26. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §224.

the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it.”²⁷ Wittgenstein therefore takes the achievements of everyday knowledge and ordinary language as occasions to reorient his thinking about the ideal, viewing everyday claims to knowledge as a means of overcoming or confronting the skeptical threat, and thereby of escaping rather than distracting oneself from the grip of absolute certainty.

Perhaps Wittgenstein’s proclamation that his eyes simply are shut to doubt—an affirmation which Cavell takes up in his stunning development of the concept of “acknowledgement”—shows that the everyday is at least vaguely aware of the threat of skepticism. I doubt, however, that the everyday’s recourse to acknowledgement is likely to satisfy the skeptic at this point. Instead, the skeptic is likely to feel as if “falling in love with the world” is just a nice way of formulating the everyday’s obsession with “practical purposes” and merely reinforces its irritating inability to appreciate the real experience of inescapable doubt and uncertainty he is trying to express. The persisting point of departure seems to be the everyday’s recourse to “what I want” in order to justify human claims to knowledge—wanting to walk, for example, or, wanting the door to turn. The everyday’s reliance on what I want fails to resonate with the skeptic because, as we witnessed in the first section above, what the skeptic “wants” is precisely what is at stake when he confesses his inability to know—the skeptic’s fantasy, in short, is for reason to dictate his desires, not the other way around. As such, what the everyday needs to show if it expects the skeptic to take the concept of acknowledgement seriously is that the wish for certain knowledge that underlies skepticism is not altogether different from the wish for meaning, or for communication, or for love, that underlies everyday knowing.

Directly before asserting that we “want to walk,” Wittgenstein pauses his investigation to emphasize the skeptic’s own wish, writing: “The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable, the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty.”²⁸ By characterizing the crystalline purity of logic as a requirement imposed by the skeptic rather than as a result of some prior investigati-

27. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 431.

28. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107.

on, Wittgenstein seeks to humanize the skeptical position, to challenge the basic philosophical assumption that certain knowledge is the ideal to which human knowledge merely aspires, to suggest that certainty is not divinely ordained or inherently superior to everyday knowing, and to expose the subjectivity involved in the wish for objectivity, as if to grant the skeptic the claim that his doubts are not in service to everyday needs, thereby forcing him to articulate exactly what his doubts are in service to, or else to admit that they are equally as arbitrary, or as foolish, or as human as the claims to everyday knowledge he is trying to escape.

While Part I of the *Notes* concentrates on the Underground Man's philosophical expression of skepticism, Part II focuses on the Underground Man's attempts at human interaction above ground. These interactions tell a strikingly different story about the Underground Man's relation to the everyday, suggesting that his failure to shut his eyes in the face of doubt, that is, to fall in love with the world, is less a result of his "moral obligation" as an intelligent man, and more a product of his failure to understand or appreciate the world around him. Nowhere is this more apparent than when the Underground Man invites himself to a farewell party of an old schoolmate, Zverkov. At one point in the evening, one of the guests at the party, Trudolyubov, proposes a toast to the departing Zverkov. "To your health and to a good journey!" Trudolyubov exclaims. "To old times, gentlemen, and to our future, hurrah!" While the others drink to the toast, the Underground Man does not budge. When asked why he refuses to drink, he says that he would like to propose his own toast. He then leads the audience through a series of strange reflections about himself, speaking nothing of Zverkov or his departure. When the Underground Man finally realizes in horror that his toast is going nowhere, he abruptly stops his train of thought and concludes: "I love thought, Monsieur Zverkov. I love genuine comradery, on an equal footing, but not...hmmm...I love...But, after all, why not? I too will drink to your health, Monsieur Zverkov!" The other guests are outraged crying, "To hell with him!" and proposing that "people should be whacked in the face for saying such things."²⁹

When the men go to leave the party, the Underground Man finally acknowledges that his toast was insulting and tries to ask for Zverkov's forgiveness. Zverkov responds: "Insulted me? You? In-sul-ted me? My dear sir, I want you to know that

29. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 53-54.

never, under any circumstances, could you possibly insult me!”³⁰ Zverkov’s denial of the Underground Man’s insult demonstrates that the others do not take the Underground Man to be a part of their world. He does not appreciate their conversation, he sees their concerns as trifles and their interests as petty, and he feels that he is infinitely more cultured than they are. His obsession with philosophical ideals prevents him from acting on everyday human judgments, from participating in the community above ground, and from making himself intelligible to others, so he is cast out, or casts himself out, into the underground. The door falls off the hinges.

Knowing the skeptic does not amount to dismissing the Underground Man’s madness when he suggests that he is too noble to be defiled by dirt, or that his characterlessness is a moral obligation of intelligent men, but rather to looking behind the skeptic’s madness, to understanding the human conditions that are driving him to the point of insanity, to realizing that the Underground Man is deceiving himself in his self-characterizations, to showing that his experiment to tell the whole truth about himself has failed, and to acknowledging—as Liza does at the conclusion of one of his tirades when she discards his hateful words and flings her arms around him, bursting into tears—that *he himself is unhappy*. In particular, Dostoevsky’s *Notes* help us to discover that the skeptic portrays his isolation from the world as a result of his pursuit of certain knowledge in order to cover up the opposite truth: that he *is* alone, and skepticism is his way of coping with that; that “the wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason”;³¹ and ultimately that his skepticism is a modern expression of his alienation from his community, or his disappointment with himself, such that his proclamation that he can never know is a way of denying, or repressing, or excusing the idea that he does not know, how to give a toast, for example, or how to love a woman, how to insult another person, how to be a part of another person’s world, how to allow another person to be a part of his.

Here we are reminded that even Descartes’ *Discourse* does not begin with a philosophical argument for skepticism’s truth, nor does it begin with a logical proof of the requirement for certain knowledge; rather, it begins with an autobiographical story of Descartes’ life. The story opens with Descartes as a schoolboy, desperate to

30. *Ibid.*, 56.

31. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 20.

encounter the truth through formal education. “But,” Descartes continues, “as soon as I had finished the entire course of study, at the close of which it is customary to be admitted into the order of the learned, I completely changed my opinion. For I found myself involved in so many doubts and errors, that I was convinced I had advanced no farther in all my attempts at learning, than the discovery at every turn of my own ignorance.”³² This is not a story of philosophical doubt; it is a coming of age tale, of a boy trying to fit into the world, and of that world pushing back; of his teachers becoming charlatans, his books becoming propaganda, and his home becoming foreign; so that the closer he gets to the world—that is, the more he begins to master it—the more cracks that begin to appear in the surface, the more he feels that he is becoming a slave, and the more he questions whether this world belongs to him, whether he belongs to it. It is precisely this feeling of abandonment, not by the ideal of certainty, but by the everyday world, that delivers Descartes to the point of questioning everything he once claimed to know.

The final result of the dilemma between the crystal palace and the chicken coop, between logic and ordinary language, between skepticism and the everyday, is not a man wholly convinced of either position, but rather a restless man filled with a sense of profound angst, trapped in what the Underground Man calls an “abominable state of half-despair and half-belief,”³³ what Cavell calls “that struggle of despair and hope that I can understand as a motivation to philosophical writing.”³⁴ Skepticism and the everyday only converge at bedrock, when justifications are exhausted and one is forced to say: “This is simply what I do.”³⁵ Here we can imagine Wittgenstein resting on his spade while the Underground Man furiously buries himself in the hole. Should we call these two poses of philosophy, or is only one of philosophy and the other of the everyday? While Descartes’ childhood story has long been forgotten by the philosophical canon, his skeptical method has become so engrained into the fiber of philosophy that, for many, Wittgenstein’s questioning the precept of doubt itself seems like an attempt to destroy philosophy. But does falling in love with the world signal the end of philosophy after all, or rather a reconstitution of philosophy’s beginning?

32. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, and the Meditations*, trans. John Veitch (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989), 12.

33. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 9.

34. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 44.

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

4. Where Are Our Words?: A Mythic Reply to Cavell's Mythology

CHARLES DJORDJEVIC

What we do is to bring [or lead] our words back
from their metaphysical to their everyday use.
LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*

The original sin [of positing sense data, a metaphysical
abstraction]... by which the philosopher casts himself
from the garden of the world we live in.
J.L. AUSTIN, "Other Minds"

Then the picture we get is not of the philosopher as
playing the game of the ordinary... but as casing his
words into exile. That is casting our words.
CAVELL, "The Wittgensteinian Event"

The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can
be observed, nor will people say "Here it is" or "There it is"
because the kingdom of God is in your midst.
The Gospel of Luke

This essay aims to offer a response to Cavell and his invitation for just such responses, as I read him.¹ It offers a reading of later Wittgenstein based on a different mythology than Cavell's modernist mythological one. Specifically, I aim to provide a myth that sees words in their metaphysical uses not as in exile, as a cast out of the garden of the everyday by the machinations of serpentine philosophers. Instead, I of-

1. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions and remarks. See Cavell, "The Wittgenstein Event," in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (London: Belknap Press, 2005), 211-212.

fer a myth that sees the metaphysical use as a holiday for our words², a form of unrestrained playfulness that is a facet of how we learn our ways about with them.³ In turn, this optimistic myth casts a philosopher not as an individual engaged in a tragically heroic, but ultimately futile, seeking of the “kingdom of the everyday”⁴ but as a person who has come to understand the axis of our real needs.⁵ I shall unfold such a myth later and hope to show that it gives us a means to dance. Pursuant to this, my mythology casts metaphysics not as an inherent flaw, a manifestation of our inability to live with our finitude⁶, but as a playful response to it.

Section I sets the stage. I discuss what constitutes a “philosophical responses.” Such a discussion is necessary as responding to a myth with a myth may, on a particular construal of philosophy, simply fail to be philosophical. In section two, I briefly discuss what “myths” or “symbolic expressions”⁷ are as well as argue that they play ineliminable roles in philosophy. In section three, I offer what strikes me as the guiding mythology of Cavell’s understanding of the “metaphysical/everyday” distinction.⁸ I cast Cavell’s mythology as modernist and read it against the backdrop of *Fear and Trembling*, a text by John of Silence that Kierkegaard was kind enough to edit.⁹ Pursuant to this, I interpret Cavell, and his Wittgenstein, as knights of resignation who take tragedy and fallenness as a part of our all too human and finite condition. In section four, I offer my own myth, again based on Kierkegaard, which casts Wittgenstein as a knight of faith. I further argue that this mythology recasts both Wittgenstein and philosophy not as beautiful but futile attempts to run “into the walls of our cage”¹⁰ but as a form of playfulness that casts metaphysical uses of language as

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Press, 2009), §38.

3. *Ibid.*, §123.

4. E.g., Cavell, “The Investigations’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself,” in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. J. Gibson and W. Huemer (London: Routledge Press, 2004), 26.

5. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, §108.

6. It is not an accident that Cavell’s seminal work has “Tragedy” in the title.

7. Cf. e.g., Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 343-354.

8. Wittgenstein, *The Philosophical Investigations*, §116. For a reminder of how complex Wittgenstein’s use of “metaphysical” is and why it does not reduce to simply “bad,” see Joachim Schulte, “Ways of Reading Wittgenstein: Observations on Certain Uses Of the Word ‘Metaphysical,’” in *Wittgenstein and His Interpreters: Essays in Memory of Gordon Baker*, ed. G. Kahane, E. Kanterian, and O. Kuusela (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 159-166.

9. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

10. Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Cambridge: Hackett Press, 1993), 44.

requests for understanding and attempts to make sense of ourselves and our world. Finally, in section five, I argue that this faith-ful mythology exposes a troubling feature of “therapeutic” readings of Wittgenstein.¹¹

I. Setting the Stage

Before one begins to respond to a myth about the metaphysical/everyday distinction with another myth, a critical question is forced on us. To wit, should such myth-making count as a philosophical response? Ergo, before I can either discuss Cavell’s mythology or reply to it with a different mythology, an articulation of what feature(s) render a response philosophical is required. Without this articulation, one runs the risk of simply failing to reply in the proper key.

Let us begin with the use of “philosophical.” In everyday language, a “philosophical” work, response, etc., is often cast as pragmatically useless, not worthwhile, or wholly speculative. Thus, if one is told one is being “philosophical,” this often means that one is avoiding or missing some practical dimension that is more important. Alternatively, “philosophical” is often applied to New Age-esque works that offer self-help in a post-religious world. In either case, it is clear that the use of “philosophical” by philosophers is somewhat different. Specifically, it seems that there are two different accounts of “philosophical” within philosophy: (a) the professional account; and (b) the personal account. Let us take each in turn. I then offer (c) my own account that incorporates the laudable aspects of both while avoiding the drawbacks each has.

(a) The professional account takes the word “philosophical” to properly apply to the problems, works, schools, interests, etc., that philosophers engage with, in their academic capacity. In other words, the professional account is, broadly speaking, sociological, and understands the use of “philosophical” in terms of the research programs that philosophers engage in. Of particular note for the professional account are three interrelated features of the activities of professional philosophers engage in. In turn, these features give a rough-and-ready guide to the proper application of the

11. James Conant, “Throwing away the Top of the Ladder,” *The Yale Review* 79, no. 3 (1991): 328-364. Gordon Baker, *Wittgenstein’s Method: Neglected Aspects*, ed. K. J. Morris (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), *passim*.

term “philosophical” to some items.¹² These features are: philosophers often address themselves to other philosophers, long-standing philosophical problems, attempt to confirm or confute a particular school, etc.; philosophers insist on specific methodological standards of rigor, clarity, precision, and argumentation; and philosophers often teach a particular canon of texts to their students in their universities. I argue that these features are unable to adequately characterize “philosophical,” however.

The central problem with understanding “philosophical” in terms of who/what philosophers address is that there is no agreement on, e.g., who is a valuable conversation partner or what constitutes a serious philosophical problem. For example, some philosophers view Freud's work as pseudo-scientific nonsense best placed in the dustbin of history.¹³ In marked contrast, others take Freud as a critical figure who raises fundamental issues that must be addressed within philosophy.¹⁴ In a related key, some philosophers take the turn to modal metaphysics as a sure sign of philosophical progress as well as an essential step towards answering long-standing philosophical problems, if only philosophers would try harder to master these new logical tools.¹⁵ And, again, in marked contrast, other philosophers view modal metaphysics as a strange mix of common sense and nonsense, a retreat from the best features of classical analytic philosophy.¹⁶ Thus, there is no commonly shared set of persons, approaches, problems, etc., that all and only professional philosophers address.

The central problem with methodological conditions like clarity, rigor, etc., is that they are often based on little more than rhetorical invectives against individuals, traditions, etc., that a philosopher does not like. Thus, consider: “I guess that our thinkers have been immunized against the idea of philosophy as the Mistress Science by the fact that their daily lives in Cambridge and Oxford Colleges have kept them in personal contact with real scientists. Claims to Fuehreship vanish when postprandial joking begins. Husserl wrote as if he had never met a scientist—or a joke”;¹⁷ “[G]ranted that de-

12. I use “item” in the broadest sense to include, e.g., teaching, reading, writing, conversations, and so on.

13. E.g., Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Routledge Press, 1962), 33-59.

14. E.g., Richard Wollheim, *Sigmund Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), passim.

15. E.g., Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 278-292.

16. E.g., P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1996), 228-273.

17. Gilbert Ryle, *Philosophical Papers* (London, Hutchinson, 1971), 180-182. Obviously, given that Husserl was Jewish and lived to see the rise of National Socialism, this quote is particularly troubling.

construction has rather obvious and manifest intellectual weaknesses, granted that it should be fairly obvious to the careful reader that the emperor has no clothes, why has it proved so influential among literary theorists? [...] [W]e live in something of a golden age in the philosophy of language [...] the age of Chomsky and Quine, of Austin, Tarski, Grice, Dummett, Davidson, Putnam Kripke, Strawson, Montague”;¹⁸ “Why does Butler prefer to write in this teasing, exasperating way? [...] obscurity creates an aura of importance. It also serves another related purpose. It bullies the reader into granting that [...] there must be something significant going on.”¹⁹ What is striking about these quotes is that each is predicated on a simple, informal fallacy that philosophers teach undergraduates to detect and dismiss in their first-year logic courses. Thus, Ryle resorts to an ad hominem against Husserl in particular and phenomenology in general. Searle appeals to the authority of such talented people in our golden age to cast aspersions on Derrida. And Nussbaum begs the question against Butler as she does not specify what “clarity” is as well as ascribing to Butler a rather odd motive. Thus, it seems as though “clarity,” “rigor,” “precision,” etc. are not principled philosophical standards, but rhetorical tools used to attack individual thinkers or schools.

The central problem with the canon is that it simply does not exist in an uncontested form. This can be most clearly seen by reflecting on both diachronic and synchronic variations. Diachronically, the texts, problems, methods, and so on that are taken as philosophical change in a marked way. For example, today, many philosophers view language as critically important to philosophy, whereas Modern Philosophy took it as a secondary issue.²⁰ Synchronically, one needs only to examine the differences between philosophical courses and topics addressed at *The New School for Social Research*'s philosophy department and contrast it with the classes and issues at *Rutgers University*'s philosophy department.

(b) The personal account makes sense of the use of “philosophical” in a very different manner. To begin, the personal account attempts to take seriously the range of applications that “philosophical” has in everyday life. Thus, in addition to New Age guidebooks and useless speculations, we also apply “philosophical” to novels, pain-

18. John Searle, “The World Turned Upside Down,” *New York Review of Books* (Oct. 27, 1983): §5.

19. Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler,” *The New Republic* 22 (1999): §2.

20. See Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), for an apt discussion.

tings, moods, films, conversations, and so on. Moreover, such uses need not betoken any negative assessment. Granting this, the personal account attempts to derive from this medley of uses some clear overlapping features that determine our ordinary use of “philosophical.” Specifically, the personal account notes that items that we tend to count as “philosophical” begin from a place of doubt or confusion. Indeed, for the personal account of philosophy, some reflection counts as philosophical when the reflection takes some x that we ordinarily understand as odd, seemingly out of place, perhaps even impossible. Granting this, part of what determines if “philosophical” correctly applies to an item is the manner by which a person addresses the item. Specifically, the person philosophically addresses the item when she addresses it in a doubting and critical way.²¹

To further articulate this, consider three examples that the personal account claims are philosophical and the commonalities they share. Thus, consider: Augustine’s reflections on time; the film *Stalker* by Tarkovsky; and *On the Plurality of Worlds* by Lewis. Each of these is counted as philosophical, in spite of substantial differences in medium, style, method, and so on. However, one can plausibly argue that each work shares a problematization of some feature that we ordinarily understand without ado. For Augustine, it is both clear that time makes perfect sense to him ordinarily and yet his philosophical reflection disturbs this sense;²² for Tarkovsky, common assumptions about the goal of human desires are rendered senseless; for Lewis, simple sentences like “If Napoleon would have won the war, we would all speak French” demand ever more sophisticated logical machinery to make sense of. Thus, again, the personal account of philosophy contends that some item is philosophical when a person responds to this item in a doubting and critical way.²³

Granting this, however, the personal account faces two critical problems. First, the personal account lends itself to a problematic form of philosophical imperialism. To see this clearly, consider that the personal account maintains that the sole criterion that determines if some item is philosophical is the reaction of a person to it. Indeed, Cavell maintains that a plausible translation of *Philosophical Investigations*

21. E.g., Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 4.

22. Cf. e.g., Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Book* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 26.

23. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 95.

(hereby PI) §123 is “[a] philosophical problem has the form: ‘I cannot find myself.’”²⁴ In turn, this means that the item itself divides out of consideration in a rather odd way, as all that matters is my reaction to it. In other words, some item is responded to in a philosophical manner when, and only when, I reflect on it in a doubting and critical way, regardless of the item itself. This is not to deny that there is a “grammatical structure” that partly constitutes this reaction, i.e., non-personal features of the doubt as it addresses itself to the item. However, it is to insist that the reaction, and the “grammar” therein, does not depend on the item that provokes it. Indeed, “[s]ome philosophers are able to make about anything into a philosophical text [i.e., react to some item in a doubting and critical manner], like a preacher improving upon the infant's first cry.”²⁵ In other words, though there is a structure that governs how the reaction works, it is critical that the reaction elides the item itself. Indeed, the item that provokes it can be anything or nothing, the cry of an infant, the loss of a friend, diamonds and squares that eloquently move across a proof in modal logic, and even the feeling of absence itself. Thus, the item divides out of view, and I am left with my structured philosophical reaction towards it.²⁶

However, such an emphasis on how I react may, in fact, lead me to grossly misunderstand the item by forcing it to be “philosophical.” For example, consider a true gift like being loved. To respond to the gift in a doubting or critical manner (i.e., to treat it “philosophically”) is to abrogate acceptance and destroy the spirit of the gift. Indeed, Cavell makes a similar point concerning Lear.²⁷ To react to love with doubt is to have already lost the very item one claims to reflect on. Indeed, as Wittgenstein insisted, there must be a distinction between “philosophy” and “its raw materials.”²⁸ Without minding this gap, we run the risk of systematically distorting or ignoring the item itself in the name of our dogmatic reactions to it, even if these reactions have a structure to them that is important.²⁹

Second, the personal account struggles with making sense of why philosophical reflections have the unique structure that they do. For example, Cavell notes that

24. Cavell, “The Investigations’ Everyday Aesthetics of Itself,” 23.

25. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 4.

26. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §293.

27. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 267-366.

28. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §254.

29. Cf. *Ibid.*, §131.

philosophical problems, and the grammar of a philosophical response, have a rather unique and specific structure that is lacking in, e.g., a physicist's critical reaction to a hypothesis. Specifically, philosophical problems seem to demand answers that are exception-less, universal, and apodictic.³⁰ However, it is simply unclear why philosophical problems should have this structure. As it were, it is not clear how the grammar of specifically philosophical doubt might differ from the grammar of a physicist who struggles with an experiment, or a person who struggles with a difficult love. And in turn, this might make mischief for various forms of therapy. Why doesn't the physicist need to learn to stop asking her questions? What is about the grammar of philosophy that demands the impossible?

Given this, let us turn to (c), my own account of what determines when the term "philosophical" is rightly applied. I argue, specifically, for two standards, one drawn from the professional account and one from the personal account. First, and with the professional account, I assume that specific non-reaction-based criteria determine if some item counts as philosophical. Expressly, I assume that for an item to count as philosophical, the item must be articulated and discussed either in a natural or constructed language. Moreover, I further maintain that such an articulation constitutes a reasoning practice. In other words, a critical standard that determines if some response is philosophical is that the item is reasoned about in language.

Let us briefly examine "reasoning practices" more thoroughly before moving on. First, I stress that a "reasoning practice" should be understood in such a way that the verb, "to reason," is given pride of place. Given this, second, the verb "to reason" is an activity verb in Vendler's sense.³¹ This is because (i) the transition from continuous tense to perfect tense is always licit (ii) the prepositional modifier used with the verb is "for" (e.g., "I have reasoned for an hour") (iii) the verb does not accept numbers (e.g., "I reason three times in an hour" is grammatically wrong).³² Third, given this, the verb is atelic. In other words, it does not code any "natural" stopping point. This point is particularly interesting as Wittgenstein stresses that "[t]he real

30. Cavell, S. *The Claim of Reason*, 49-125.

31. Zeno Vendler, "Verbs and Times," *The Philosophical Review* 66 no. 2 (1957): 143-160.

32. These are standard tests in linguistics for the lexical aspects of various verbs. See, e.g., Hana Filip, "Lexical Aspect," in *Oxford Handbook of Tense and Aspect*, ed. R. Binnick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 722-725.

discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing [i.e., reasoning out loud] when I want to,”³³ a natural goal if the verb itself encodes no end-state. Fourth, the verb can accept other participants by using a with-clause (e.g., “I reasoned with John about his messy divorce”). Fifth, relatedly, the with-participant betokens the comitative case. This is because (i) sentences with “S reasons with-y” can be paraphrased as “S and y reason together” and (ii) the object in the y clause must be at least animate, if not human. Sixth, given that this is the comitative case, the practice of reasoning requires mutual cooperation on the part of both the subject and the participant.³⁴ Thus, much as the sentence “S walks with-y” encodes a shared activity that both willing participants in (otherwise S merely follows y), so too does the verb “to reason” encode such a shared activity. Finally, seventh, in turn, this means any non-mutual participation is a grammatical violation. In other words, the grammatical structure of the verb requires that power, appeals to authority outside the reasoning practice, and so on, divide out. Thus, a reasoning practice is a mutual exchange between willing participants wherein each works with the other to articulate some item in a manner that makes the item clear or senseful.³⁵

Second, and with the personal account, I assume that the personal reaction of a person to an item, and her subsequent attempt to articulate it, cannot be understood apart from the reaction. In other words, part of what renders an item philosophical is the felt need of a person to give it articulation in language. Thus, the personal account is quite right to insist that the shift from “raw materials” to “philosophy” requires that the person become confused, find some item odd, etc. In turn, this is in marked contrast to other academic disciplines wherein, e.g., the structure of the overall subject ensures that specific questions are licit and apt.³⁶ Indeed, an indeterminate number of items can provoke the sort of confusion or doubt that can then lead to articulation.

Given such a conception of “philosophical,” the nature of “response” is also rendered transparent. Accurately, to respond to a philosophical item requires that a

33. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §133.

34. For a helpful discussion, see, e.g., Thomas Stolz, Cornelia Stroh, Aina Urdze, “Varieties of Comitative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Case*, ed. A. Malchukov and A. Spencer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

35. Cf. Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*, §122.

36. E.g., Peter Hacker, “What is a Philosophical Problem?,” *Think* 4, no. 12 (2006): 17-28.

reasoning practice emerges and that this practice be mutual and be focused on articulating some item that has confused one (or more) of the individuals. One way to ensure this mutuality is to stress the role of invitation and conversation. In turn, this helps my account avoid imperialism as the invitation to reason can be rejected. Moreover, it also helps explain why specific set topics, problems, and so on, tend to preoccupy philosophers and are counted as philosophical. It is not that these have some “essence” that links them. Instead, their persistence is explained in terms of invitations that were and are made, from the misty past to today, to address specific items jointly. Finally, third, such responses cannot rely on any sort of “coercive” power. In other words, the idea that one can be ‘compelled’ to change one’s mind is deeply problematic as such a violent metaphor vitiates the underlying mutuality that the reasoning practice relies on. Indeed, Wittgenstein³⁷ and Cavell³⁸ both stress precisely this rejection of war based metaphors, force, and violence for philosophy. The problem is that any coercion, even that “compelled” by the “light of reason,” already assumes a shared mutuality that may have yet to be established.

In sum, a “philosophical response” is a joint and mutual reasoning practice wherein individuals attempt to articulate an item so that it is clear/makes sense to them. With this in view, let us examine both if a myth can be a philosophical response and, if it can, what role a myth might play in a reasoning practice.

II. A Characterization and Defense of Mythology as a Philosophical Response

With my discussion of “philosophical response” in place, let us consider if mythology (or symbolic expressions) can be appropriately called a “philosophical response” as well as what function(s) such mythologies might play in a reasoning practice. To begin, mythology is often cast as either antithetical to philosophy or else as a form of propaganda that a philosopher might rely on to spread her “enlightening” views among “the herd.” Indeed, mythology, symbolic expressions, and metaphorical lan-

37. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1956), §113.

38. E.g., Cavell, “The Wittgenstein Event,” in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (London: Belknap Press, 2005), 203-205.

guage, more generally, are often cast as merely parasitic deviations from literal discourse.³⁹ That being said, I argue that mythology can be counted as a philosophical response in our above sense. Moreover, I argue that mythology has a critical role in maintaining the ongoing reasoning practice at issue.

Let us begin by attempting to characterize mythological or symbolic expressions. First, Cavell notes that “symbolical expressions, or uses, are places where we are trying to make sense of our efforts to make sense of our lives and are led to utterances [...] which Wittgenstein understands as a gesture in which you have expressed ‘how it strikes you,’ an expression to which he [Wittgenstein] thereupon pays attention.”⁴⁰ Second, somewhat pursuant to this, these myths are “not the end of the argument but its transportation into another mode of discourse.”⁴¹ Specifically, a myth allows us to bring into focus different *Weltanschauungen*.⁴² Moreover, third, myths accomplish this by helping to focus our attention not on the rules of a game, but on its point.⁴³ To use an example that we return to throughout this section, I can describe a room in a myriad of different ways, each of which can be correct or wrong. The room might be cozy, haunted by the absence of a dead loved one, 4 by 4 meters squared, have a desk and a chair, be brilliant in the sunrise, etc. However, which description I utilize shows how I take the room (or questions about it) to be, the key I rely on, the mythology that determines my ways of speaking and doing. “I cannot bring myself to go into the room. Ever since my son died, it feels like blasphemy to enter and defile his things” is one mythology, one way of making sense of ourselves to and with each other, as is, “I think we should paint the wall a calming color with stars, so that the little one [a smile and a touch on a ripe belly] can find some peace in her new world,” another. In other words, how I describe what I describe turns on the mythology behind it, how it strikes me,⁴⁴ and this striking is as much about me as the room, as much about how we exist with and for each other. “My soon-to-be-born daughter’s place in the world; let us try to make it as lovely as we can, for the world is so hard!” “My dead’s son tomb; I cannot bear to go into it any longer, a place

39. Max Black, “Metaphor” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55 (1955): 273-294, for such a move. Though see, e.g., Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 74-82, for a radically different conception.

40 Cavell, “The Wittgenstein Event,” 197.

41 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 365.

42. *Ibid.*, 363-366.

43. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §564.

44. *Ibid.*, §219.

where angels dare not tread.” Finally, fourth, Barthes can helpfully be read as harmonizing aspects of this. He claims that

[m]yth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way which it utters this message [...]. A tree is a tree [...]. But a tree as expressed by Minou Droeut is no longer quite a tree [...] [it becomes] laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short, with a type of social usage which is added to pure matter.⁴⁵

Though Barthes’s subsequent analysis becomes bogged down in a structural analysis of language/myth, I take this insight to be critical. Indeed, Wittgenstein notes that “magic is always based on the idea of symbolism and language.”⁴⁶ In other words, language is never merely stapling labels to objects, sharpening our concepts so that their extensions are clear, and using possible worlds to grasp the intensions. Instead, language is itself a form of abstraction, a form of symbolism, a form of magic, a mythology.

Taken together, these features understand mythology as an attempt to bring into focus, not the objects and concepts that our words refer to or express (or whatever other theory of semantics one likes). Instead, it brings into focus how language itself frames the world, how our talking about a room in a certain way already has implications for how we deal with it, the sort of inferences we are likely to make, and so on. Thus, the role of a mythological expression is to give voice to how something strikes one, which is to say, how one’s initial descriptions of an item affect the sorts of properties, relations, etc., one is likely to ascribe to it. Given this, there is nothing *prima facie* problematic with a myth as a philosophical response. Indeed, such an attempt to examine the parameters that determine a particular initial description as well as how these parameters lend themselves to specific predicative patterns is in no way antithetical to philosophy.

However, given this, it is still unclear what role(s) such mythologies might play in a reasoning practice. To clarify one role that mythology might play in philosophy, let us consider Wittgenstein’s odd use of the painted pot parable,⁴⁷ as he develops his

45. Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang Press, 1972), 109.

46. Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, ed. J. Kluge and A. Nordmann (Cambridge: Hackett Press, 1993), 125.

47. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §297.

private language discussion, as well as how Cavell reacts to it.⁴⁸ I should note that Cavell calls this story of the pot a parable.⁴⁹ However, it seems to me that this sort of a parable is an instance of mythology as Cavell understands it,⁵⁰ and as I discussed above. As we shall see, part of the work of this parable is exactly to transpose an argument into a different key, a key that lets us see not the content of a description, but the process of it—i.e., how a particular picture of pain strikes a voice, and how we can spell out this voice's fears and reactions. Once in place, I then discuss one role that mythology might play in philosophy.

To begin, the painted pot myth emerges at a *prima facie* odd moment during the private language discussion. In the passage right before it, one voice has just stressed, “there is a Something all the same which accompanies my cry of pain!”⁵¹ Further, and following Cavell, this point can be read as an ethical insistence. In effect, the voice protests Wittgenstein’s arrogant attempt to make its pain vanish in a poof of logic. The voice has a pain, it feels it, and it is deeply offended by any slide of hand attempt to “prove” that this pain does not really exist (i.e., it is not a “Something”). Wittgenstein’s two reactions to this voice are crucial and bring into view what role a mythological expression, a parable in this case, might play in philosophy.

First, before giving his pot myth, Wittgenstein asks, “to whom are we telling this? And on what occasion?”⁵² Notice that there is a noticeable shift here from “I” to “we.” In turn, this can be read as Wittgenstein appreciating the force of the ethical point and trying to respond to it appropriately. As it were, the use of “we” functions to remind the voice, and the reader, that it is only our fellow human beings and things like them that can be said to feel pain.⁵³ Moreover, this reflects Wittgenstein’s refusal to rely on any proof to “compel” (which is to say violently force) a voice somewhere it does not want to go. Instead, Wittgenstein is seeking to restore a mutual understanding.⁵⁴ After this attempt to re-establish a shared connection with the voice, Wittgenstein offers us his pot parable, a moment of myth-making. He writes that:

48. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 332-343.

49. *Ibid.*, 332.

50. *Ibid.*, 362-363

51. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §296.

52. *Ibid.*

53. E.g., *ibid.*, §284.

54. *Ibid.*, §242.

Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot and also pictured steam comes out of the pictured pot. But what if one insisted on saying that there must be something boiling in the pictured pot?⁵⁵

Notice that this response is mythological in the sense mentioned above. It does not contribute to an argument, understood as unfolding inferential and deductive relationships between propositions, say. Instead, it attempts to articulate how the insistence on “Something” in the voice’s initial description of the situation affects what sorts of inferences, predicative patterns, and so on, the voice is likely to accept. In other words, the painted point provides an “object of comparison”⁵⁶ wherein we can clearly see how an initial way of describing some x leads us towards certain questions, problems, and so on. Moreover, in this case, it seems that the object of comparison is meant to help both the reader and the voice realize that the insistence on “Something” is already problematic as it leads to flawed questions. Does the painted pot “really” have painted water that we cannot see? It simply is not clear what could address this, if it is taken as an epistemic question rather than an aesthetic one. Similarly, the question of if the voice “really” has a pain confuses an epistemic topic with an ethical demand. In each case, what Wittgenstein is trying to bring into view is “the conjuring trick,”⁵⁷ and he does so precisely by introducing an object of comparison that gives voice to the mythology guiding the initial description.

Abstracting from this, it seems that the role of mythology in philosophy is to remind us that how we describe some x is not merely “given” by the x itself.⁵⁸ Moreover, it also attempts to emphasize that this initial description has critically important ramifications for how arguments, understood as mentioned above, will work. And most interestingly, this use of a myth offers a way to circumvent the famed Agrippa trilemma. This trilemma begins by assuming that, for any proposition p, it is (i) justified by other propositions, (ii) so “certain” that questioning it, somehow, leads to irrationality or (iii) is a mere dogmatic assertion. The problem with (i) is that it either causes a regress or ends up being circular; the problem with (ii) is that there

55. *Ibid.*, §297.

56. *Ibid.*, §130.

57. *Ibid.*, §308.

58. Cf. Cavell, S. *The Claim of Reason*, 369.

simply is no such thing as perfect “clarity”; the problem with (iii) is that it begs the question against the objector. However, the trilemma presupposes that what is at issue is always already argumentation understood above. Part of the function of mythology is avoiding this assumption by reminding us that how we describe, our initial reaction, is not justified via inferential or deductive relations. Moreover, mythology achieves this precisely by being a literary form of language. In effect, this role of mythology is providing us with an object of comparison that shows the contours of how an initial description works.

In sum, a mythology or a symbolic expression is an attempt to bring into focus how we initially describe some item throughout a reasoning practice. Given this, it is clear that mythology can play a critical role in philosophy as it offers us tools to examine how our initial descriptions affect the subsequent argumentations, predications, etc. we are likely to make. Indeed, “[t]he mythological would then be what the idea of the metaphorical [the parable of the pot, the dead son’s room/tomb, the yet-to-be daughter’s place in our world] here is a metaphor for.”⁵⁹ They focus not on what we describe, but how and why we do so. And it seems clear that such operations, such reminders that I can describe a room in terms of the area just as well as in terms of hope of comforting reassurance (or dreadful echoes), are critical to philosophy. Is the soul a bad driver torn between two horses or is the soul a moment of infinity harmonized with, and in love with, the finite (“Eternity is in love with the products of time”⁶⁰). How we think, argue, express, interpret, etc., ourselves, our world, our language, depends critically on the mythologies below these questions. Indeed, arguments presuppose the mythology. And to display this and, perhaps, bring someone to see a new aspect, depends on objects of comparison that re-present a new myth, a new way of going on, a new way to be struck by the same old room.⁶¹

59. Ibid, 364.

60. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (New York: Dover Publisher, 1994), 31. For the need to violently master our ‘lower’ selves, see Plato “Phaedrus,” in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, ed. E. Hamilton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). For a radical love of the finite so deep it causes us pain, see Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 431-524.

61. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, II, xi. See also Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 369-370.

III. Cavell's Myth: The Tragic Weight of Humanity

In this section, I turn to the mythology that seems to guide Cavell's reading of the metaphysical/everyday distinction. I note here that this section will be somewhat different from the above two in that the goal is not argumentation per se. Instead, the goal is trying to bring into focus how Wittgenstein strikes Cavell and how this guides his interpretation.

To begin, it seems to me that the best mythology to use to foreground how Wittgenstein strikes Cavell comes from John of Silence and his mythic tales of two knights.⁶² I should note here that the passages I draw from, and John of Silence's book more generally, strike me as perhaps the most beautiful mythic prose written in philosophy. Ergo, my excerpting cannot do justice to the wit and beauty of the work. Regardless, Silence, who counts himself as a knight of resignation, tells us that "[I]t is about the temporal, the finite, everything turns in this case. I am able to renounce everything, and then find peace and repose in pain [...]. But by my own strength, I am not able to get the least of the things which belong to finiteness, for I am constantly using my strength to renounce everything."⁶³

To begin to mythically unpack this, in a manner akin to the pot, it is critical to realize that the knight of resignation is someone who has recognized the profound limitations and felt the strictures of being a human being. He is someone who, for whatever reason, has come to realize that what we often take to be iron cords between the "ich" and the "du," the supposedly necessary steel that sits below our social practices and ensures that they run correctly, rules with rails that stretch beyond infinity and guide us if only we listen, are simply absent. What ties us, you and I, together are not iron cords but diaphanous and fragile threads, a spider's web that, were it to rupture (and heaven forbid it does!) we feel that we have to repair with our coarse fingers,⁶⁴ that below our practices and our society is not the hard steel of some necessity but cities of words that float, as if by magic, in the air⁶⁵, that the rules we see so clearly and whose voices echo so forcefully in our minds are

62. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.

63. *Ibid.*, 40.

64. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §106.

65. *Ibid.*, §118.

nothing but figments and ghosts from Frege's third realm.⁶⁶ In other words, a knight of resignation is someone who has:

seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.⁶⁷

From here, the knight of resignation reacts to this moment, the moment where the eternal Footman snickers, and we see how little is truly in our control, by resigning. To be more specific, and less circular, the knight of resignation withdraws from the world where a loved woman may reject us, where a dear friend may become an enigma, where our words and our deeds may cease to make sense, where we may be dragged off to the madhouse, and retreats into his "I." Further, this movement, this withdrawal, renders the world a scary place, a place where our finitude, and our knowledge of an utter lack of control, is allowed to absorb everything else. Indeed, a knight of resignation is so painfully aware of how nothing he says or does can call out to another as he wishes, that he is alone with only his "I," that only a faith she lacks can save her.

With this myth in view, let us turn to Cavell. To begin, Cavell himself suggests that our inheritance of Kierkegaard's mythology of the knights helps make sense of Wittgenstein and the role of the everyday. Indeed, it is "the knight of faith alone who achieves not exactly the everyday but "the sublime in the pedestrian."⁶⁸ Moreover, this suggests something else as well, something that further aligns Silence's text with Cavell's inheritance. For Silence, and from his perspective, the knight of faith is never seen, and surely not understood. Indeed, he looks just like a tax collector, and none of his movements betray either the resignation or the return.⁶⁹ Similarly, and tellingly, it is unclear what might mark the difference Cavell insists on—what is the difference between the everyday and the sublime in the pedestrian? It seems as though Cavell has faith in it, as Silence has faith that the knight of faith exists. But how shall we un-

66. *Ibid.*, §201.

67. T. S. Eliot, *Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Poems* (New York: Amereon Ltd, 2002), 12.

68. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 39.

69. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 39.

derstand this faith? And who is Cavell's second knight? We take this up again in the next section.

In any case, Cavell goes on, dancing between lists of philosophers of culture and Kierkegaard, to explore what the everyday is.⁷⁰ We are told that “[y]ou cannot understand what a Wittgensteinian criterion is without understanding the force of his appeal to the everyday; and you cannot understand what the force of Wittgenstein's appeal to the everyday is without understanding what the criteria are.”⁷¹ In other words, it seems as though the everyday, and the force of Wittgenstein's reminders about it, take their strength exactly from philosophy. And Cavell appears to confirm this as he notes that

what it [the above binary relation between the everyday and philosophy] means is that what philosophically constitutes the everyday is “our criteria” (and the possibility of repudiating them) [...]. It is another way of saying that skepticism underlies and joins the concept of criterion and that of the everyday, since skepticism exactly repudiates the ordinary as constituted by [...] our criteria.⁷²

This clearly locates skepticism as the central concept, for both philosophy and Wittgenstein's reminders of the everyday.

Given this, Cavell unsurprisingly tells us that Wittgenstein's “teaching is everywhere controlled by a response to skepticism.”⁷³ Further, this skepticism arises from precisely the sort of moment that the knight of resignation has endured. Something has gone wrong, horribly wrong. And the knight (and Cavell and his Wittgenstein) begin from this moment of rupture. Specifically, they insist that “[t]he weapon [of language and its mythologizing] is put into our hands, but we need not turn it upon ourselves. What turns it upon us is philosophy, the desire for thought, running out of control.”⁷⁴ Notice, critically, that the error Cavell locates, the point at which philosophy emerges and exiles our words, is a loss of control.⁷⁵ In other words, philo-

70. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” *passim*.

71. *Ibid.*, 51.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 7.

74. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 45

75. E.g., *ibid.*, 36-37.

sophy as a response to a rupture in the everyday, is governed in and by a skepticism that marks our loss of control, our inability to stop.⁷⁶

From there, we are told that Wittgenstein's method, his aim, his teaching, "shows us that we did not know what we were saying, what we were doing to ourselves."⁷⁷ Wittgenstein tries to remind us of the fact that, in the garden of the ordinary, in most of our lives, when we cry out in pain or the words "I love you" are forced from our lips, things run correctly. However, critically, "there is no absolute escape from (the threat of) illusions and the desires constructed from them [...] no therapy for this in the sense of cure for it."⁷⁸ Indeed, "[t]his [the spiritual nausea that betokens philosophy] as it were pre-moral, philosophically chronic demand (this stand against destiny) is a piece of the intellectual fervor in the Investigations."⁷⁹ By "illusion," I take it that Cavell means our restive and restless demand, our all too human dream, that some steel will yet be found, that some iron cord can connect us together, that Cordelia can answer Lear. And by "stand against destiny," I take it that Cavell both registers the futility of what the PI does, the limits of therapy, as well as the nobility of the attempt—rage against the dying light. There is no escape from either of these poles in that (a) there are no such iron cords and (b) it is all too human to demand, insist, hope for them. In other words, the knight of resignation does not renounce the world once, which is to say both his human longing and a naïve assumption that everything runs smoothly, but continuously. Indeed, he continually reminds himself both that breakdowns are almost inevitable and that his only recourse when they occur is a certain self-control, a willingness to jump into the breach, and do his best to repair the spider's web with his human hands. And, as Cavell noted, both poles are governed by skepticism. The rupture occurs and one feels both the groundlessness of one's life ("how could she, whom I love so deeply, hurt me so badly?") and the need for assurance that there is iron somewhere ("she must not, could not, have intended it that way; she must explain it, herself, to me").

In turn, Cavell's myth continues, Wittgenstein's aim in philosophy is "to free the human being from the chains of delusions [e.g., particular philosophical problems

76. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §133.

77. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 62.

78. *Ibid.*, xx.

79. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 66.

and reactions]”⁸⁰ by “an effort to free ourselves from philosophy’s chronic wish to instill our words with, or require of them, magic [...] by reminding us of ordinary cases in which words have their genuine effect.”⁸¹ In other words, Wittgenstein’s therapy and method aim to remind us of the ordinary, to attempt to lead our words back from this dangerous precipice, this void that has opened before them and into which we throw them in a quixotic attempt to restore shared community. In other words, Wittgenstein seeks to perform a genetic sort of therapy, a therapy of tracing a philosophical response back to the original cause.⁸² And once the root has been found, the hope is that we can break the

control [e.g., a philosophical response to a problematic situation] is the constant purpose of the later Wittgenstein [...] [it is] intent upon unmasking the defeat of our real need in the face of self-impositions which we have not assessed (PI §108) or fantasies [...] which we cannot escape (PI §115).⁸³

Moreover, and of great importance for the next section, Cavell sees this therapy as a “diurnalization of philosophy’s ambitions, his [Wittgenstein’s] insistence that [...] philosophy’s call is to find itself [...] on a stair, meditating a direction.”⁸⁴ In other words, genetic therapy is meant to shed light on the roots of our illusions and, by doing so, dissolve them in the beauty of Plato’s sun at noonday.

However, and yet again, notice that the game is hopeless, completely, and utterly hopeless. On the one hand, there is no ordinary any longer for the knight of resignation. His naïve belief in it is shattered, and nothing can restore it. Indeed, Cavell’s reflection on “Austinian criteria” speak to this.⁸⁵ Nothing, no close observation, not blood and organs, not a genetic analysis, can restore to us the lost belief that there is a goldfinch that happily flutters about our garden, chirping away and bringing beauty in her wake. We have fallen, and our words are already cast out. Indeed, Wittgenstein “does not, I think, say very much about why we are victims of these fortunes,

80. Cavell, “The Wittgenstein Event,” 293.

81. Cavell, “Freud,” 295.

82. Cf. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 60.

83. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 72.

84. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 23.

85. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 65-85.

as if his mission is not to explain why we sin, but to show that we do.”⁸⁶ On the other hand, the knight must hope, must will herself to believe that somehow, somewhere, someone can remind her of the ordinary, can bring her back to the garden again. Thus, as Cavell notes,

I do not picture my everyday knowledge of others as confined but exposed. It is exposed, I would like to say, not to possibilities, but to actualities, to history. There is no possibility of a human relationship that has not been enacted. The worst has befallen, befalls everyday [...]. Tragedy figures my exposure to history as my exposure to fortune or fate.⁸⁷

The knight is continuously aware of her exposure, continually trying to repair the inevitable breaks, and constantly falling back to myths she cannot believe.

In sum, notice that this mythology “invites disappointment, since on its first approach it seems to deprive us of, rather than to give us, something precious.”⁸⁸ This note, in particular, is critical. The deprivation we feel, it seems to me, is engendered by the fact that we realize that faith is all we have and that faith does not satisfy us. Faith is all we have in that if the genetic therapy works, we recognize that there are no guarantees when it comes to the ordinary and re-establishing attunement. What holds us together, what makes us human beings, what makes our marks words and our sounds sentences, is nothing other than reciprocity between people and us. However, such a faith does not satisfy us any longer. Indeed, as with all faith, an aspect of it is horrifying. One can only trust that a conversation partner will hear one’s sounds as sentences, see one’s marks as words, and so on. Indeed, it is both profoundly human and deeply tragic to both long for and to realize that we cannot obtain something more, some moment of forced grace that assures and ensures that our words and world run smoothly.

Granting this, let us turn to PI §116 and the metaphysical/everyday distinction. Specifically, I want to reflect on where our words are when they are put to a metaphysical use, if this myth is followed out. In other words, where is it that Wittgenstein

86. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 55.

87. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 432.

88. Cavell, “Freud,” 295.

must go to lead them back from the brink, which is to say, to restore us to the ordinary? In my mind, at least, the impression I get from Cavell, not so much in passages but the tone and spirit that pervades his work, is that our words are akin to lost children in a dark woods where the straight way is lost.⁸⁹ They have wandered away from the watchful gaze of knights of resignation, have confused themselves, cannot find themselves. They are scared kids who yearn to return home, who long for the tender embrace of their elders. And this casts the philosopher as a Janus faced figure. On the one hand, he is a sort of monster or tempter. He is someone who entices our words away from their home, who leads them to such horrible places with promises of transcendence only to abandon them. In this spirit, it is little wonder that Cavell began a quarrel with philosophy.⁹⁰ Our words are not safe, and they can never be safe. On the other hand, the philosopher is also cast as an ever-watchful guardian over our words. She is ever resigned to find them, yet again when they have been tempted away, to remind and restore them to sanity, to bring them home to the ordinary. Moreover, what unites these two forms of philosophy, in spite of their marked difference, is their shared longings for some transcendental x. The monstrous form, in its hubris, believes that if only we, e.g., add more indexes, characters, boxes and diamonds, p's and q's, we can, at last, find iron cords. The knight of resignation, though feeling the pull of this hopeless hope, resigns herself to its impossibility. For her, the goal is coping with the longing, not solving it. However, in both cases, it is clear that the playfulness of our words, their ambiguities, and profligate projections, are a crucial source of problems. And, in both cases, the goal of the philosopher is removing this temptation by rendering our words "clear."

In closing, and perhaps most important of all, is that Cavell's myth leads us to put forward that "[a] philosophical problem has the form: 'I cannot find myself.'"⁹¹ What is critical here, precisely as we expect, is that Cavell's focus in on the "I." The knight of resignation, by the action of her withdrawal, has nothing left but this "I." Indeed, it is striking how often Cavell's texts display an odd tension within themselves. On the one hand, they are incredibly supple and respond admirably to other voi-

89. E.g., Cavell, S. "Declining Decline," 34-37. The tone I hear in Cavell is perhaps clearest in Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 198-199.

90. Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1984), 31.

91. Cavell, "The Investigations' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself," 23

ces that Cavell allows to speak. On the other hand, the end goal is always therapy, always self-salvation. Indeed, the entire point of genetic therapy, of reminding, and the use of sunlight as a disinfectant, is only focused on the individual “I.” This is precisely what we should expect if our Kierkegaardian mythology is correct. The knight of resignation is precisely someone who has withdrawn, renounced, and retreated into the “I.” Further, the notes we made concerning the personal account of philosophy speak to this. The Other divides out.

IV. A Different Mythology: The Endless Joy of Play

In so many ways, Cavell’s mythology is profoundly human and, for that very reason, genuinely compelling. So often, we feel that “[I]t is impossible to say just what I mean!”⁹² However, it seems to me that such a mythology is too pessimistic, too haunted by echoes of dead hopes, too modernist in the literary sense. Indeed, the genre of modernism, and its deep pessimism and longing for something elsewhere, is critical for Cavell as Cavell tells us that his reading of Wittgenstein (and so his mythology of how Wittgenstein strikes him) depends partly on it.⁹³ Given this key, the mythology I am about to offer, and the reading of Wittgenstein that it unfolds can be called “postmodern” provided this is taken in its literary, not philosophical, sense.⁹⁴ What I mean to say is perhaps best seen in Joyce. The Joyce of *Ulysses* is an author obsessed with authenticity and clarity, by a particular way of writing that fuses style, form, and substance together so that it conveys precisely what Joyce wants it to. A master who regiments his language and the worlds he builds from it with such precision that no error is possible, that his words literally say what they mean. By contrast, the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* is someone who has learned to let go, who does not seek to control his words or the worlds that emerge from them, to shepherd them back to the safety of a closed space, but who trusts them and follows the words wherever they want to go. This postmodern Joyce, and his magnificent night book of dreams, is someone

92. T. S. Eliot, *Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock and Other Poems* (New York: Amereon, 2002), 13.

93. Cf. Cavell, S. “Declining Decline,” *passim*.

94. Especially in ‘analytic’ philosophy, “postmodern” is profoundly misunderstood. It entered the philosophical lexicon well after the fact and, as with so many other political terms, functions as nothing so much as a category designed to lump together people we do not like.

who learns to see the gaps between us, the misunderstandings that arise, the finitude of language, and the inability to control our words, as something gracious in a religious sense. Joyce marvels at our ability (his own and his readers) to “play, and make up the rules as we go along [...]. And even where we alter them, as we go along.”⁹⁵ *Finnegans Wake*, unlike *Ulysses*, may be (and in some circles has been) discarded as a Nothing, an empty and meaningless heap of broken shards. And yet Joyce has faith. Joyce does not believe his audience will understand, for to “understand” *Finnegans Wake* is already something of a misnomer but has faith that the reader can learn to delight in it. As it were, for this Joyce, the breakdowns that separate us, the lack of iron cords between us, are invitations to beautiful accidents and wondrous misfires. There is no steel. And for that very reason, we can play and dance. As it were, a lack of meaning is an invitation to mean, not a horrifying void to be withdrawn from but a blank page that invites writing. And the human thing to do is not trust only ourselves and our words, but to have faith that others too can find the keys to our souls. But here I have already gotten ahead of myself.

To lay this out clearly, I return to Silence again. I lay out his mythology of the other knight, the knight of faith, and reflect all too briefly on this. Then I use this to help us reread the metaphysical/everyday use again. Specifically, I discuss where Cavell's myth and my own agree (they agree on quite a lot) and then how they diverge. I close by arguing that my myth changes how we should see the philosopher and what it means to lead our words back from their metaphysical use to their everyday use.

To begin, Silence (or, perhaps, in this case, Kierkegaard, the editor) is already playing with us when we turn to the knight of faith. On one level, the knight of faith vanishes, is meant to vanish, into the They that we are supposed to resist. However, and very much in the spirit of the old Danish saint, nothing is as comical as a counter-culture as it presupposes the very culture it supposedly counters. Indeed, the endless and frantic insistence on “authenticity,” “control,” and so on, that make up the modern are, from the postmodern's perspectives, amusing because they depend on what they claim to counter. Regardless, Silence tells us that a knight of faith “takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of an earthly man whose soul is ab-

95. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §83.

sorbed in such things [...] he is interested in everything that goes on, in a rat which slips under the curb, in the children's play, and with the nonchalance of a girl of sixteen. And yet he is no genius [...]. And yet, and yet [...] this man has made, and every instant is making the movements of infinity."⁹⁶

Let us unfold this myth further. First, the knight of faith sees the world as clearly as the knight of resignation does. For the writers that Kierkegaard was kind enough to edit, this point is often critical. A religious person is not a person who accepts the fairy tales that she has learned on her mother's knee. Indeed, there is a constant danger, especially in philosophy, but in our broader intellectual world as well, of confusing faith with blind belief. Pace this, faith is not an epistemic propositional attitude towards the world but a way of trusting it. Pursuant to this, a knight of faith does not have a blind belief in her everyday, the sort of naivetés of children who feel that their language reflects thought perfectly and that others are shadows by comparison. Instead, a knight of faith and a knight of resignation both know that this "everyday" is a vanishing point, an accident. However, whereas the knight of resignation renounces the everyday, and its sweetness, the knight of faith, trusts it. We shall return to this later.

Second, such a knight of faith has a rather odd attitude towards the unfolding of our life and language. Silence writes that "[t]owards evening he [our knight] walks home [...]. On his way, he reflects that his wife has surely a special little warm dish prepared for him [...]. If he were to meet a man like-minded, he could continue as far as East Gate to discourse with him about that dish [...]. His wife hasn't it—strangely enough, it is quite the same to him."⁹⁷ Notice that what delights this knight, this person who sees as clearly the supposed horrors of being as a knight of resignation, is not the thought of certainty, not grand reflections on the necessities that surely must lay below our feet, but a little warm dish prepared by his wife and idle talk with someone (the They? *It does not matter!*), musing on good things awaiting him at his home.⁹⁸ Further, it is crucial to notice that what makes this dish unique is not that it is the calf's head he expects but that it is there at all. Indeed, here, we begin to see what trust means. The knight of faith trusts his wife, for Silence, one imagines his

96. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 30-31.

97. *Ibid.*, 31.

98. Cf. Cavell, "Declining Decline," 64.

world, to respond to him with kindness and understanding. Relatedly the knight also trusts his conversation partner by speaking with her about things good for human beings, rather than adopting some haughty pretensions and empty distinctions between his special status and their unenlightened ways.⁹⁹ Indeed, the point of this mythic figure, this wondrous knight, is precisely how human (and in love with this) he is.

Third, the knight of faith does not interpret breaks with the ordinary, and breakdowns in understanding, as horrifying moments that must be prevented at all costs. Instead, she sees them as invitations. It is precisely because there is so much out of our control that we can learn to be with one another properly.

Given this form of trust, not doubt, a radically different conception of philosophy and the metaphysician emerges. To begin, recall that section I linked "philosophical" to reasoning practices and argued that mutual articulation is key to making sense of these practices. In turn, when someone speaks metaphysically, she is not casting our words out from their safe garden. Indeed, such an understanding of what a metaphysician is doing refuses to meet her on her terms—rather than a competent speaker inviting us to play with her, she is cast as a mad-woman, someone in need of "re-education."¹⁰⁰ Instead, the metaphysician is trying to say something buried in her heart, something that she herself does not yet know how to say. She is asking, trusting, having faith that her metaphysical use of words is an invitation to the Other to help her say what she means. Indeed, the thought that I already know what I need, that this is clear to me, is a far more deleterious myth than that of the philosopher casting our words out, a point we return to more fully in a moment.

In any case, in a stunning dialectical twist, one may say that the knight of faith rejects the knight of resignation's trust in her "I"—in the idea that what she means is clear to her, even if to no one else. Pursuant to this, when the knight of faith's words go on holiday, they are not idling sinfully or mischief-making. Instead, they are playing. And though it is important to remind ourselves that such playing cannot make up all of life, that a kind person must lead the words back from the playground of the metaphysical to their homes, where a loving parent has prepared a warm dish,

99. Cf. *ibid.*, 68-69.

100. Cf. Baker, *Wittgenstein's Method*, 287

it is imperative that they learn to play, which is to say, learn to grow up. And, in the end, the insight of the knight of faith, and of true religion generally, is that there is no such thing as moving out of childhood.

With this in view, let us turn to Wittgenstein. As I will make clear in a moment, a fundamental problem with Cavell's myth is that it leads him to read Wittgenstein as always responding to the skeptic, to ruptures and breaks, to something harmful and awful. And what such a reading elides is the sheer playfulness and enjoyment of the PI. Wittgenstein delights in puns and witty metaphors, he responds to the voices that object and doubt not with the seriousness of the grave, but with stories of talking pots in fairytales¹⁰¹ and people who buy copies of the same newspaper to confirm that a claim is right.¹⁰² Indeed, it is stunning both how sensitive Cavell is to the polyphonic (and musical) structure of the PI and how much his myth leads him to set this insight aside. Wittgenstein reasons with skeptics as much as Platonists, philosophers as much as the woman on the streets, gods as much as demons. The voices in the PI are far more complex than even the Platonic dialogues, and Plato's (perhaps latent) thought that there are "types of persons." Wittgenstein seeks to meet each voice on its own terms. And not all voices are skeptical. Some are loving, others despairing, some remind us and others hide from what they know. In any case, they are not all are the voice of someone trapped by her delusions and horrified by skepticism.

Following from this, let us begin to read Wittgenstein as a knight of faith and a champion of play. Wittgenstein tells us, wants to begin, with the thought that "[t]he preconception of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole inquiry around (One might say: the inquiry must be turned around but on the pivot of or real need)."¹⁰³ Cavell's and my mythic way of reading this claim align to a large extent. For both, the earlier Wittgenstein and his inhuman demand for perfect rigidity, for a timeless transcendental structure that claims that "proposition, language, thought, world, stand in line one behind the other, each equivalent to the other"¹⁰⁴ is the thought guiding the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The transcendental preconceptions laid down are ideals, and yet they are ideals earlier Wittgenstein clings to, as it

101. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §282.

102. *Ibid.*, §265.

103. *Ibid.*, §108.

104. *Ibid.*, §96.

is the only way to ensure that language, thought, and reality aligns in the right way. Indeed, in this key, the threat of nonsense is something that earlier Wittgenstein is obsessed with—trying to construct a perfect system or an elucidation method that allows us to see through it, ban it, excise it, free ourselves from it. Further, Cavell and I both agree that this quest for the ideal, for the preconditions of the world, for not accidental ways things are but essential ways things must be, is at once compellingly human and doomed. We demand hard steel over the pit of contingency. More philosophically, we want to discover “the essence of all things. It [the hoped results of such a quest] seeks the foundations of things [...] it arises [...] from an urge to understand the foundations, or essence, of everything empirical.”¹⁰⁵

It is the parenthetical comment in PI §108, where Cavell’s mythology and mine begin to diverge. Specifically, Cavell notes that

Wittgenstein does not harp on the word “need” [...] any more than on the word “turn,” but the weight of an idea of true need in opposition to false need seems to me no less in the Investigations than in those philosophical texts that more famously [...] contain early considerations of artificial necessities, such as the *Republic* and *The Social Contract* and *Walden*.¹⁰⁶

This claim occurs in a section wherein Cavell develops the idea that there is a vertical and a horizontal dimension of Wittgenstein’s concept of form of life. And he seems (rightly, in my mind) convinced that Wittgenstein’s supposed conservatism is due to a realization that certain attempts to escape the human would annul it completely. To suffer at the loss of a child or the absence of a loved one are human reactions, reactions of our form of *life*. And to take these away because suffering is pain and pain is bad is not to make life better, but to demand a new sort of life, an inhuman one.

However, what Cavell is at once aware of and yet unable to get into view, is this distinction between true and constructed needs that he noted above. Thus, Cavell claims that “[t]he rhetoric of humanity as a form of life [...] standing in need of something like transfiguration—some radical change but as it were from inside [...] is

105. Ibid, §89.

106. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 43-44.

typical of apparently contradictory sensibilities.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, “leaving the world as it is [...] may require the most forbearing act of thinking [...] to let true need, say desire, be manifest and be obeyed.”¹⁰⁸ And, most importantly, “Wittgenstein’s appeal or ‘approach’ to the everyday finds the (actual) everyday to be as pervasive a scene of illusion and trance and artificiality (of need) as Plato or Rousseau or Marx or Thoreau had found it.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, Cavell casts around for some Archimedean point, some axis of true needs, that diurnal philosophy can bring into view by dissipating shadows of artificial ones, as we await the coming of the real needs into the clearing opened by the light. Notice that this way of thinking about the turn itself turns on Cavell’s modernism. Modernism in part depends on precisely the sort of dichotomies that Cavell seems to proffer here—true needs and constructed ones, that which shines forth in the light and the shadows, authenticity and idle chat. To presage a bit, one wonders what happens to the knight of faith annoying his peers with empty chatter of warm dishes made by his beloved and his keen interest in a rat as it runs here and there, doing rat things?

In any case, one problem this mythology faces is that it seems to require a distinction and then a distinction within the distinction. For the first distinction, it may look as though Cavell needs some dichotomy between everyday uses of words, and the authentic desires they express, and extraordinary uses of words, and the constructed (or illusory) desires they are pegged to. However, Cavell rightly notes that this is far too simplistic, as it stands. And this is because we do not merely have authentic needs and natural expressions for them. To bring this into view, Cavell powerfully develops projections of words and how these create new worlds, complete with new selves and new ways of being in relationships. Thus, consider that as Cavell’s daughter learns her words, she tries to extend them, project them, play with them, learn their meanings by seeing their limits. “Kitty” gets used for soft things, to refer to four-legged beasts, to reflect the human need to be petted and loved, and so on. This is, it seems to me, a compelling account of our ways with language.¹¹⁰ We do not merely staple labels to things and pretend that we do not understand when a child (tries) to use

107. *Ibid.*, 44.

108. *Ibid.*, 45.

109. *Ibid.*, 46.

110. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 169-190.

“kitty” for “pet me.” Indeed, such a feigned lack of understanding is reminiscent of Augustine’s story of language learning where his elders beat him until he conformed. Instead, as mentioned in section II, language brings with it an entire mythology, complete with new ways of describing and relating, new points and projects, new ways of being human. For Cavell’s daughter to use “kitty” as a request for love and affection is as much for her to form and foster a new desire, and a new way of being, as it is to express herself. However, if this is so, then the role of diurnal philosophy becomes increasingly hard to bring into view. The daughter’s request for a new relationship, for affection, when she finds herself lonely or scared, her use of “kitty” as opposed to screaming into the void¹¹¹, changes her- it constructs at once a new need and a new way to request it be fulfilled. And it is simply unclear if we can (or should) use the blinding light of the sun to dispel this.

Ergo, to sustain this deep insight on Cavell’s part, to keep before our eyes that being human cannot bear to be divided between animalistic urges like food and cultural wants like company, a distinction within the distinction is required. My everyday use of words reflects nothing so much as the limits of my current world.¹¹² However, and blessedly, that limit can be upset as my world changes. I may fall in love and find myself with new needs and new words to convey them. I may find myself speaking in trite ways about warm dishes my beloved has prepared for me and find myself not caring if she hasn’t. In turn, the only way for diurnal philosophy to function, the only way that it can dispel illusionary needs while remaining true to Cavell’s insight that words open up worlds and worlds need new words, is by insisting on a further break, another distinction. In effect, there are the extraordinary uses of words (writing bad love poetry, say) and metaphysical uses of words. And it is this metaphysical use of words that is, in some yet to be specified way, inauthentic and so illusory, and so in need of the pure light of relentless philosophizing.

However, this attempt to make a distinction within a distinction, to insist on genuinely new worlds that call for new authentic languages, on the one hand, and mere illusions thrown up from elsewhere, on the other, is problematic for an exegetical, a philosophical and, most importantly, a mythological reason.

111. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §244.

112. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge Press, 1974), 5.6.

Exegetically, Wittgenstein points out that “I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: really one should write philosophy only as one writes a poem.”¹¹³ This quote seems to cancel the difference between writing poetry as one learns how to be in love and doing metaphysics as one learns one way, among others, to come to grips with our humanity. In each case, there is a grave threat that we misunderstand what writing does—i.e., we take our panegyric poems of the beloved to describe them, and then we come to be disappointed when our angel shows herself to be a human being, and, in a profoundly similar way, when we take our metaphysical play with language to “explore the essence of all things. It [metaphysical philosophy] seeks to see the foundations of things [...]. It arises [...] from an urge to understand the foundations, or essences, of everything empirical,”¹¹⁴ and then feel deprived or furious when we cannot draw G-d’s mind down from heaven and study it as biologists study bugs. However, the source of this confusion is not the writing. Instead, it is our interpretation. Indeed, Wittgenstein notes that “[h]ere it is easy to get into that dead end in philosophize where one believes that the difficulty of the problem consists in our having to describe phenomena that evade our grasp.”¹¹⁵ The issue here, critically, is not the philosophizing, not a flawed skeptical reaction to a break with the ordinary, not a way of driving out artificial need. Instead, the issue is that we are led to a dead end when we think about philosophy in terms of descriptions at all.

Relatedly, my mythology also shifts what Wittgenstein means when he says, “[t]he real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question.”¹¹⁶ The discovery here is not internal to philosophizing, as Wittgenstein has pointed out that the reasoning practice of philosophy makes no such discoveries.¹¹⁷ Instead, the discovery is the realization that philosophy is not meant to describe it all—be it the hard cords of necessity or the deferred phantom of the everyday.¹¹⁸ And the peace that is sought for philosophy is not a peace internal to the process. Indeed, Wittgenstein stresses that what torments philo-

113. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 28.

114. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §89.

115. *Ibid.*, §436.

116. *Ibid.*, §133.

117. *Ibid.*, §126.

118. Cf. Cavell, “Declining Decline,” 73-74.

sophy is not philosophy, but questions outside of it that put it into question. In other words, what torments philosophy and what torments writing poetry as well, is a culture that insists on practicality and seriousness to the exclusion of all else. Penning poems to one's beloved is childish, as is speculating about the nature of necessity, as is talking endlessly about hot dishes. And it is this, the child's voice and her insistence on play, that Wittgenstein seems to want to defend.

Philosophically, the problem with Cavell's distinction in the distinction, his attempt to use daylight to separate out new worlds and authentic words, and the metaphysical use of language, is that it does not seem viable at all. This can be seen in several ways. One can point out that the abstract-to-the-point-of-useless attempt by Frege and Russell to reimagine logic and link it to mathematics (and language), created new worlds and new words and sciences for it. One can point out that Rousseau's thought of the natural goodness of humanity and the corrupting power of externally imposed power-structures echoes powerfully in our political thinking. However, the most pressing question of all is how we come to make this distinction in the first place. How do we come to know our real needs and illusions? And, as Cavell seems to both acknowledge and disavow, we can only do so in and through metaphysics itself. Indeed, without this very projection, this curse that burdens language so, the idea of true needs becomes itself, problematic. True needs over and against what?

The mythological point flows from this, in turn. Specifically, Cavell's modernist mythology leads him, ironically, to be skeptical of our needs. There are some that our illusory, flawed, and inauthentic, and our task as philosophers is to expose these. In turn, this casts trust, or faith, as dubious. Indeed, here, trust would be little more than insisting that "I follow the rule blindly."¹¹⁹ However, this skepticism, this distrust, has two problematic effects. First, the ordinary is forever pushed away, as we simply do not know when we have struck it and when we have found only the illusions that lay over it.¹²⁰ Again, the knight of resignation, Cavell's knight and his Wittgenstein, refuse the sweetness of the world for fear of being mystified. Second, it misunderstands the nature of faith and the trust that underwrites both my mythology

119. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, §219.

120. Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 46.

and my Wittgenstein. Trust is not mere blind belief, nor less is it an antidote to illusions. I can think of no better way to say this than:

God has pity on kindergarten children,
 He pities school children—less.
 But adults he pities not at all.

He abandons them,
 And sometimes they have to crawl on all fours
 In the scorching sand
 To reach the dressing station,
 Streaming with blood.

But perhaps
 He will have pity on those who love truly
 And take care of them
 And shade them
 Like a tree over the sleeper on the public bench.

Perhaps even we will spend on them
 Our last pennies of kindness
 Inherited from mother,
 So that their own happiness will protect us
 Now and on other days.¹²¹

In other words, faith is not a trust in, or return to, the everyday. Instead, faith is something we achieve by dragging ourselves, streaming in blood, to the dressing station. It comes by trusting that someone at that station can and will help us. And it comes from realizing that the last precious pennies of kindness we inherited from our mother are to be shared. It comes not by resigning and disillusioning oneself, but by

121. Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 1

trusting that someone (or Someone) will answer our call, be they an illusion or not.¹²² For what is an illusion, after all, than a fragment of modernism's insistence on authentic and real?

Let me develop this mythology, this Wittgenstein as a knight of faith, a bit further before I return to the question of how to bring words home. Thus, consider PI §15 and PI §42. In PI §15, Wittgenstein offers us a game with clear rules, well-defined actions, crisp words, and a sharp everyday (one imagines). To wit, Builder-A shows Assistant-B a sign "a," and she must go fetch the tool with a carved into it. However, in PI §42, Wittgenstein later asks if "even names that have never been used for a tool [e.g., 'X'] got a meaning in this game [i.e., PI §15]?"¹²³ It seems that Cavell's myth would lead him to answer this question in the negative. The problem with such a sign "X" is that it is not ordinary as rigidly defined by PI §15, it is not an authentic sign, and it cannot possibly reflect the tool Builder-A needs at this point. Indeed, what is Builder-A doing holding up such a sign? Does he not realize that "X" has no role, is idle, and on holiday? Is Builder-A trying to expel Assistant-B from the paradise of such a well-regulated ordinary? Wittgenstein goes on, "even such signs could be admitted into the language-game, and B might have to answer them with a shake of the head. (One could imagine this as a kind of amusement for them.)"¹²⁴ This quote is striking for so many reasons. The function of "X" in the hands of Builder-A is, especially if we take the parenthetical comment seriously, an invitation for Assistant-B to play as well as an acknowledgment of Assistant-B's humanity, her ability to play and respond without or outside of the rules, or even the everyday. Further, such giving a home to "X," helping each other and ourselves make sense of it, is, far from deleterious, a human thing, one to be celebrated and encouraged. Moreover, if my above discussion was persuasive, it is unclear if this extraordinary use, this "X" with no tool and no home, and Builder-A with no true need, can be differentiated from a metaphysical use. Indeed, perhaps metaphysics is a form of play? A point we return to in a moment. In any case, and finally, what governs this, what can assign a meaning to "X," is a faith in play. Salvation, it seems, comes from the jesters.

122. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, 457.

123. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §42.

124. *Ibid.*

With my mythology in view, we finally turn to where our words are and how Wittgenstein leads them home. To begin, my mythology refuses the modernist distinction between authenticity and illusion, extraordinary uses and metaphysical ones, and so on. Indeed, the metaphysical use is just another form of projection, just another way of playing with our words and following where they may lead us.¹²⁵ Moreover, in this mythology, metaphysical uses are striking because they are among the most human uses we can imagine. I cannot help but read Plato's dialogues or Leibniz's letters and feel the pull they have, the need to articulate something they cannot quite say, and the hope that others can help them articulate. New words and new worlds they struggle with, new ways of being human, new ways to use "kitty" (a tired word) for requests for love and understanding. Indeed, metaphysicians here are not madmen talking in ways they do not understand, but human beings who have realized that they can only say what they want with the help of Others. Metaphysics need not be the dreary business of regimenting language and hashing out modalities. Metaphysics can be a form of play, a concept-poetry that may very well help us come to grips with our finite status. Metaphysics is the perfect object of comparison. And to seek to remove it, to mitigate it, to train someone to stop it, is akin to Augustine's elders beating him into using his words correctly.

In turn, this recasts Wittgenstein, the place of our words, and their homes. For Wittgenstein, he is no longer understood as possessed by an almost inhuman fervor and demand for the destruction of all illusions.¹²⁶ Nor less is he cast as a policeman, a therapist, or a god of death who shows the cares of mortals to be no different than the games of children (of course there is no difference and that elevates both). Instead, Wittgenstein is cast as a loving parent who calls us "du," the "you" of lovers, and of Buber. Moreover, he leads or shepherds our words and ourselves home not with the violence of Augustine's martinet elders nor with the frantic pace of a fanatic, but with the tenderness of a parent who guides them as they play.¹²⁷ And he leads them home not to lock them away, not to prevent them from playing again tomorrow, from projecting themselves and growing, from tripping and falling, from bruised knees and hurt feelings, from the beautiful illusions that make up so much of childhood, but to

125. Ibid, II, xi, §250.

126. Cf. Cavell, S. "Declining Decline," 66-67.

127. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §172.

remind them that, though play is important, it is not the whole of life, that warm dishes and pennies of kindness matter too. Indeed, in this myth, Wittgenstein is a parent who realizes that “[I]f people did not sometimes do silly things [like play in metaphysics], nothing intelligent would ever get done.”¹²⁸ Thus, “[d]on't, for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense [e.g., projecting metaphysically]! But you must pay attention to your nonsense [e.g., remember this is a game].”¹²⁹

Given this, the metaphysical use of words is also transformed. It is not an illusion, a constructed want, a phantasmagoric error. Instead, it is recast as what it is, one more form of projection, one more way of playing with our words and ourselves, one more attempt to expand our words and worlds. Indeed, as mentioned, and as Wittgenstein said, “I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: really one should write philosophy only as one writes a poem.”¹³⁰ What, after all, is metaphysics but a sort of poetry? An attempt to invent new ways to say new things? Indeed:

People caught in a homeland-trap;
to speak now in this weary language a language,
a language torn from its sleep in the bible: dazzled,
it wobbles from mouth to mouth. In a language that once described
Miracles and God, to say car, bomb, God¹³¹

What languages, after all, are not asleep and do not need such new words for new worlds? And what is philosophy, after all, but one attempt to find and invent new terms for our longings?

In sum though Cavell's mythology and his knight of resignation are surely correct that a perennial temptation and a pernicious mistake is to misunderstand what metaphysics is, to confuse a kind of concept-poetry with a super-physics. However, his mythology goes wrong by reiterating modernist binaries—binaries between everyday and extraordinary, authentic and idle, illusion and reality, light and dark-

128. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 50.

129. *Ibid.*, 56.

130. *Ibid.*, 28.

131. Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 57.

ness. Indeed, what such binaries occlude is something that Peirce rightly points out about another age of metaphysics. Pierce notes that the best way to understand scholasticism is

to contemplate a Gothic cathedral. The first quality of either is a religious devotion, truly heroic. One feels that the men who did these works really believe in religion as we believe in nothing. We cannot easily understand how Thomas Aquinas can speculate so much on the nature of angels [... it was simply because he held them to be real. If they are real, why are they not more interesting than the bewildering varieties of insects which naturalists study.¹³²

Critically, the sheer beauty and rigor of St. Thomas's work, the felt sense of piety and the love and care he took with it, is unaffected by the supposedly sharp line between illusions and reality. For Pierce, scholastic metaphysics was concept-poetry written for and about G-d. And to deny the nobleness of this because we now “know” what true needs are; because diurnal philosophy has exposed St. Thomas's true needs; because our modernist ways have shown that St. Thomas's angels are mere specters— strikes me as merely a sad remnant of modernism and its relentless insistence that we grow up. What can be more human than the contemplation of dancing angels?

And, similarly, for Wittgenstein as a knight of faith, and for the postmodern myth we have unfolded, the mistake is not metaphysics—any more than it is walking, delighting in rats running here and there, small dishes and annoying chats about them, etc. Rather, the mistake is to cast this human, beautifully human, desire to play with each other, to project our words and follow where they lead, to trust each other to make sense of ourselves and our hearts, and to have faith in a parent who lovingly leads us home for a quiet night so we can play tomorrow, as itself an illusion, a child of the darkness, something best removed. In other words, Wittgenstein's real fear is not the ghost of skepticism per se, but a culture that has forgotten how to write poetry and lost why musing on angels is a painfully beautiful thing human beings do. And what is diur-

132. Charles Pierce, *The Essential Pierce: Selected Philosophical Writings Vol. 1*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 86.

nal philosophy or genetic therapy but a way of eliminating this, of using the cold and inhuman sun to dissipate the “illusions” that make us who we are, of making us take seriously serious things? Critically, though, and pace modernism and its mythology, “[e]ven in the darkness there are divinely beautiful duties. And doing them unnoticed.”¹³³ In the darkness, that is where we see the knight of faith, slowly walking home as the dusk settles in, towards his loving wife, and his trusted world.

V. Therapy: A Pharmakon¹³⁴

I want to close by briefly reflecting on the rather widespread assumption that Wittgenstein is an intellectual therapist and that the peace he aims to give us is the peace of a world without philosophy.¹³⁵ I should stress here that the version of therapy I lay out is not Cavell per se. Instead, it is one way of inheriting him. First, I lay out briefly the myth that seems to be lurking here as well as what pharmakon [treatment or cure] is being offered to us. Second, I argue that if we were to take this pharmakon [poison], we would be given a peace that resembles nothing so much as the peace of the dead- intellectual euthanasia.

To begin, the myth that seems to ground the image of “Wittgenstein as therapist” casts him as a tormented individual and his view of “philosophical problems” as a sort of mental disorder. The myth is sustained in a myriad of ways including examination of the Nachlass,¹³⁶ reflections on his tortured life,¹³⁷ and so on. From here, the myth goes on to ascribe to Wittgenstein a host of different methods,¹³⁸ each designed to help us learn to stop asking specific questions, stop raising problems, and to help us return to the ordinary. Indeed, this myth nicely aligns with Cavell's myth of heroic struggle against our all too human nature.

133. Johann Georg Hamann, “Letter to Christian Jacob Kraus,” in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth Century Questions and Twentieth Century Answers*, ed. J. Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 177.

134. Obviously, the person who did the most to play with the double meaning of “pharmakon” is Derrida. See Jacques Derrida, “Plato's Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

135. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §133.

136. Baker may be the most sustained examination of the Nachlass in this way. See Baker, *Wittgenstein's Method*, passim.

137. Ray Monk, *The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Press, 1991), passim.

138. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §133.

However, we should reflect on what such therapy would actually achieve, were it possible. In other words, if we could learn to accept our finite status and learn to stop asking specific questions, raising certain problems, and so on, what would this brave new world look like? I argue that such a phamarkon would remove something essential, and fundamentally human, about our ways with words. Indeed, it is striking that Conant, a champion of the “Wittgenstein as therapist” myth, acknowledges and represses this. Thus, we are told that, after therapy, what we are left with is “our own sense of deprivation”¹³⁹ without mythically exploring why we feel so deprived.

To begin, it seems like the goal of this therapy is to re-educate philosophers so that they learn to stop doing certain things with their words. In turn, if therapy is successful, such people would accept that words mean only in their home language-games, that trying to cast them outside of this game is inherently problematic. The critical problem, though, is that such a resignation renders projection, analogies, play, and so on, with words rather hard to understand. Cavell's daughter, one imagines, would accept that “kitty” refers to felines and would not try to use the word to ask for affection, say.

In turn, such an acceptance drastically alters our relationship with our language. Language becomes, as it were, something foreign and outside us, a set of tools with clear uses that we have polished in such a way that we see how they work and where to put them. And we, the language users, are more akin to tool users who deploy words to do jobs. The problem, though, is just that “words can be wrung from us- like a cry. Words can be hard to utter.”¹⁴⁰ Our words, and our relationships with them, are not that of a carpenter and a tool. Indeed, consider Augustine's use of language in *The Confessions*. Augustine is not merely reporting his life, using dead words to convey forgotten deeds. Instead, Augustine tells us that he is trying to use his words to call upon Something he does not know and cannot understand. Indeed, Augustine is at once painfully aware of how limited and limiting his language is when compared to the Divine and how it is all he has to offer, that he and his words stand before God. Furthermore, this attempt to express himself, to say something to a God

139. Conant, “Throwing away the Top of the Ladder,” 337.

140. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §546.

that already knows what is in his heart and his past, is not so much reporting as constituting. Augustine needs words for God precisely because Augustine needs to be a self that can stand before God. And this tendency, this longing for something we cannot ever quite get into view, is part of what drives us to write poetry, perform confessions, and yes, even to do metaphysics.

Given this, if we take the pharmakon offered to us in the form of philosophical therapy, it seems like what it would ameliorate or excise is precisely this felt need for something we know not what. Granting this, it is clear that the people who emerge after taking the phamakon, after unbending the bow of their longing, would have a feeling of peace in the same way Nietzsche's last humans have a peace.¹⁴¹ In both cases, humanity becomes a domesticated animal, their words become wholly dull things, knowing their places and never causing problems, and their hearts would learn to accept that if they cannot say it, it must be passed over. And such a shift, such a pharmakon, would lead to a passive acquiesce. Indeed, I daresay that the therapist, not the metaphysician, is the one who does not know what she is doing, who cures us by exterminating the most beautiful aspects of us—our longing and restiveness, St. Thomas's beautiful reflections on angels as they dance splendidly on pins. To remove philosophy is to remove its source. And its source is wonder, as has been often said and often forgotten. To remove wonder, one trains people to accept that “[t]he earth has become small, and on it hops the last human being, who makes everything small [...]. They abandon the regions where it is hard to live [...]. ‘We have invented happiness’ say the last human beings, and they blink.”¹⁴² Such a peaceful world strikes me as inhuman—the peace of a place where nothing lives any longer.

In closing, the real tragedy, it seems to me, of casting Wittgenstein as a therapist, as a figure who helps us resign, as an inventor of happiness, is that Wittgenstein himself fought so hard against precisely this cultural tendency to reduce all problems to puzzles and all longings to clear preferences. We are told that “Man has to awaken to wonder—and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again.”¹⁴³ It seems to me that the role of the pharmakon Wittgenstein supposedly of-

141. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. Pippin and A. Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

142. *Ibid.*, 10.

143. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 5.

fers us is that of “[a] bit of poison once in a while; that makes for pleasant dreams,”¹⁴⁴ a way of sending us to sleep again.

144. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 10.

5. Marriage as Madness: *Love Crazy* and the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage

LUCAS THOMPSON

It is fatal to be a woman or woman pure and simple;
one must be a woman-manly, or a man-womanly.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*

[Marriage] is both the cause and the effect of what
happens to it. It creates pain that it is the only
cure for. It is the only comfort for its hardships.

WENDELL BERRY, "The Long-Legged House"

There are no words to express the abyss between
isolation and having one ally. It may be conceded to
the mathematician that four is twice two. But two is
not twice one; two is two thousand times one.

G. K. CHESTERTON, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Aside from being one of the best books ever written on film, Stanley Cavell's 1979 masterpiece *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* is surely also one of the best investigations we have into the institution of marriage. Here as elsewhere, Cavell has multiple targets in his sights. Along with mapping out a new subgenre within the screwball comedy and moving the then-newly christened discipline of film studies forward, his aims are also philosophical (searching for the ways in which these films "disquiet the foundations of our lives"), sociological (searching for cultural connections between the two waves of feminism), and matrimonial.¹ Ca-

1. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9.

vell is trying to discover what makes marriages work, and under what conditions a married pair might be able to find the “thirst for remarriage” that he takes as its essential element. Moving well beyond accounting for filmic portrayals of the married state, *Pursuits* is a virtuosic exploration of marriage itself, with countless insights to offer.

Discovering *Pursuits* sparked my own obsession with the five films Cavell discusses at length, but also with a range of adjacent films mentioned only in passing. Over the course of reading the book, I watched many more films by the same directors and featuring the same actors, as well as others with similar plots and themes from the same period. Cavell’s insights gave me a new understanding and appreciation of such films, which I might never have discovered without his encouragement. His book reveals what is so vital and moving about the remarriage comedy genre, by showing how these comedies ultimately dramatize the search for attunement. How might a pair come to be attuned to each other’s moods, ideas, forms of life? And how might they sometimes—temporarily or permanently—fall out of tune with both each other and themselves? I had never before understood how putting such questions to popular films could be so productive, nor had a new passion sparked so dramatically, and I discovered endless delights and insights. Yet Cavell’s book is obviously not the last word on the topic. Many worthy films go unanalyzed, and *Pursuits*—like any academic book worth reading—raises many more questions than it answers. There are countless lines of Cavell’s thinking that might be extended further, and many adjacent films that could also be fruitfully placed within his genre. One might well make a case for many other superlative films of the period as being worthy of inclusion.

Which is what I want to do here. One film from this same period that has often been on my mind, and which I think both deserves a much wider audience and cries out for a sustained reading, is Jack Conway’s *Love Crazy* (1941), starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. The film passes entirely unmentioned in Cavell’s book, though he does make a passing reference to “the mutual pleasure and trust William Powell and Myrna Loy give one another” in *The World Viewed*, conceivably with *Love Crazy* in mind, although more likely thinking of their far more famous performance of Nick and Nora Charles in MGM’s long-running *Thin Man* series (1934–

1947).² Yet *Love Crazy* adheres to every last criterion of Cavell's genre: it has a female lead born between 1905 and 1911, a plot that fits his broad narrative structure, and a release date within what Cavell identifies as the genre's golden period, spanning 1934 through 1941. Unsurprisingly, it also has numerous points of connection to other key films in the genre, not least in its chief script writer, Charles Lederer, who adapted *The News Room* into *His Girl Friday* (1940) for Howard Hawks the year before, as well as the screenwriter David Hertz, of *I Met My Love Again* (1938) fame. The film's director, Jack Conway, also made other remarriage comedies, and *Love Crazy* was produced by MGM, responsible for many of the best comedies in this vein from the thirties through to the fifties. Moreover, it contains many subtle allusions to other films within the genre—for instance, the use of Gail Patrick as the primary threat to the marriage (reprising the same role she played opposite Cary Grant in *My Favorite Wife* [1940] and opposite Powell himself in *My Man Godfrey* [1936]), and an insider reference to *The Awful Truth* (1937), which also features a vaudevillian performance of a long-lost “sister.” *Love Crazy* also works as a revealing commentary on the already iconic pairing of Loy and Powell in the wildly popular *Thin Man* series, playing on and with the knowledge that it assumes audiences will have from their familiarity with the depiction of the Charles marriage, as well as their performance of a married couple in *I Love You Again*, yet another remarriage comedy from the year before.

Of course, one could discuss countless films of this period within the terms of Cavell's genre, even beyond those he nods toward in the book: *That Uncertain Feeling* (1941), *Together Again* (1944), *Pat and Mike* (1952), *The Palm Beach Story* (1942), and *Phffft!* (1954) are just a few other titles that neatly fit within his genre. In this article, though, I want to make a case for *Love Crazy* as one of the very best remarriage comedies. My claim is that this film picks up and elaborates on many of the themes and characteristics charted by Cavell, while also containing enough intriguing variations to repay close examination.³ It offers poignant forms of cinematic knowledge on marriage as a kind of madness, as improvisation, and as requiring and

2. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 5. Incidentally, Cavell also refers in this same book to another film concerned with marriage, which he never again wrote on: “Let us suppose that *L'Atalante* is the best film ever made about the idea of marriage, specifically about the ideas of taking in marriage and being given in marriage.” (176)

3. It also contains a “difference that moves the genre forward” that Cavell sees as a requirement for a film being awarded status in this category.

enabling a particular kind of privacy. The film also has much to say on the necessary humblings that are essential to a flourishing marriage, as well as the proper way for a married couple to consider questions of gendered difference. Like the five films analyzed by Cavell, it offers something like a “spiritual parable” of marriage, which speaks elliptically, powerfully about the state itself.⁴ My key claim is the one Cavell makes for the five remarriage comedies in his own series: that if we properly appreciate what the central pair have accomplished, we might be able to find the same for ourselves. Which is to say that these films, like all the other texts, people, and experiences that make up our lives, offer models that might either be followed or rejected in the endless perfectionist search for our own “next” selves.

I am all too aware of the objections to such an argument. It is a depressing fact that in 2020, there are still the same intellectual and cultural barriers to treating films of this period and genre and commercial provenance as being worthy of serious study. We are still a long way from widely recognizing them as the profound artistic and cultural achievements they really are—from “possessing them fully” as Cavell hoped we one day would.⁵ David Shumway is a contemporary film studies scholar unusual in the depth of his contempt for Cavell (particularly the Cavell of *Pursuits*), but wholly representative in his dismissal of this period of Hollywood films. Predictably, Shumway takes all “screwball” films to be motivated out of nothing more than “patriarchal interest and ideology” and designed to serve purely commercial ends.⁶ Noting that American divorce rates nearly doubled between 1910 and 1940, he takes these films as mere ideological apparatuses, suggesting that their enormous popular appeal can be exhaustively accounted for in the suggestion that given the rising divorce rates, “a majority of the film audience doubtless found it pleasurable to be reassured about the possibilities of marriage.”⁷ One needn’t look far to find others disparaging this period in similar ways, and it is tempting to say that such critics are succumbing to “the seedy pleasure of feeling superior to [what they perceive as] drivel”—a dubious “pleasure” that Cavell warns against in his remarks on James Agee’s film criticism.⁸ The film’s immediate success

4. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 7.

5. Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1984), 18.

6. David R. Shumway, “Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage,” *Cinema Journal* 30, no. 4 (1991): 8.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 8.

and box-office takings may well also have served to discourage more generous readings: Emily Leider notes that *Love Crazy* ranked ninth in MGM's list of its ten most profitable films of 1940–41.⁹ (*Gone with the Wind* was well out in front, while another masterpiece of the remarriage comedy genre, *The Philadelphia Story*, came in second.) Even more damningly, Myrna Loy herself, at a low point and deeply unhappy in her real-life marriage to Arthur Hornblow, described the film as pure “froth.”¹⁰ Was she right? Is the film too silly, too frivolous, too far-fetched, or too tainted with nakedly commercial imperatives to sustain the pressure of such an investigation? These are legitimate questions, but I aim to stare them down in what follows.¹¹ Cavell's own writings on popular Hollywood entertainments are my guide here, as is his encouragement to run the risk of *over-* rather than *under-*interpreting. (“[M]ost texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread,” he says early on in *Pursuits*.¹²) It is part of their strange charm that such 30s and 40s comedies themselves often invite us to dismiss them as “mere” comedies or mere “froth”—to laugh off or else explain away their own frightening, destabilizing claims. Yet I have learned only too well how persistently they linger, how they prompt serious reflections and in so doing constitute part of what we say that we know about marriage, gender, and politics.

This is perhaps by the by, but I am also interested in the ways in which Cavell's readings of popular films go well beyond the tired operations of critique, which have been rightly taken to task in recent years by literary critics such as Rita Felski, Toril Moi, Susan Friedman, and others.¹³ It is important that Cavell takes these films on their own terms, letting his interest in them guide his thinking. (Try to “let a text teach you how to consider it,” he encourages in the preface to *Pursuits*.¹⁴) And Cavell has no interest whatsoever in playing the familiar game of exposing sinister ideological

9. Emily W. Leider, *Myrna Loy: The Only Good Girl in Hollywood* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 223.

10. *Ibid.*, 223.

11. Of course, many other critics, sometimes prompted by Cavell, have discovered the power of such films and taken them seriously. Maria DiBattista is one, who devotes an excellent book to the female leads in these comedies. She discovers in the women of these films “the most exhilarating and... empowering model for American womanhood,” and notes that the Italian novelist Italo Calvino also found in them something similar, taking them as crucial depictions of “the woman who rivals men in resolve and doggedness, spirit and wit.” See Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven, NY: Yale University Press, 2003).

12. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 35.

13. For a good overview and introduction to the field of postcritique, see Rita Felski and Elizabeth Anker (eds.), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

14. *Pursuits*, 10.

operations. Indeed, his way of taking these films in good faith has often prompted others to call him a naïve or misguided interpreter. Far more conventional and familiar is the kind of criticism that sees nothing but the remarriage comedies' crass economic imperatives or sinister ideological manoeuvrings. I want here to see for myself whether it is possible to approach such a text as unguardedly and as generously as Cavell does. His readings continually asks how we might treat a text as an equal partner in a conversation, speaking neither down nor up to it. I would like to aspire to something similar here.

Let me begin, then, in true Cavellian style, using the method he follows for all of the films discussed in *Cities of Words* (some of which either reprise or extend his thinking in *Pursuits*), with a detailed plot summary. *Love Crazy* is obscure enough to warrant an extended introduction, but a summary of this kind also introduces many of the threads and themes I will pick up in the subsequent analysis. I have seen it wrongly and ungenerously summarized elsewhere, and it is important to set the facts of the narrative in order. Bear with me here: the précis is a lengthy one, but a film of such complexity cannot be summarized hurriedly. Alternatively, if you have no need for this kind of summary, feel free to skip ahead, where the analysis begins in earnest.

1. The film opens with an overhead shot onto a city street; a jaunty orchestral tune plays on the soundtrack over blaring car horns. A taxi cab, emerging from the traffic, pulls up outside an apartment block from which a doorman is emerging. On a cut to the cab's interior, we see Steve Ireland (William Powell) happily singing along to a portable phonograph balanced on his knee. The song, it turns out, is the one we previously took to have been non-diegetic—"It's Delightful to be Married," which Luise Rainer as Anna Held sang to her husband (played by Powell) upon arriving in New York in MGM's *The Great Ziegfeld*, released five years earlier. (Loy also starred in this earlier film.) Steve operatically repeats the sentiment of the song ("It's Delightful to be-be-be-be-be-be-be-be Married") to the doorman, Jimmy, and asks for an affirmation of its sentiment. "Well, *sometimes*..." he replies, with a good-natured if slightly knowing laugh. Steve, in teacherly tones, tells him that "There's nothing wrong with anyone's life that a good marriage can't cure." Emerging with a bouquet of roses, he continues singing as he heads inside. Jimmy, suddenly grave and conspiratorial,

says to the taxi driver: “He’d sure sing a different tune if he lived with my old lady for a while.”

2. The elevator taking Steve up to his apartment shudders to a halt, to Steve’s considerable alarm: “I can’t be stuck: I’ve got the most important date of the year tonight!” He tries soothing the elevator as one would a horse, promising to “put it out to pasture in a beautiful green meadow.” The charm works, to the delight of the elevator boy: “There she goes, sir, she’s alright now!” After entering a luxurious and stylish apartment, the housekeeper (Fern Emmett) takes the flowers, tells Steve that Mrs. Ireland has been “primping since breakfast,” and confirms that they will, as per Steve’s prior instructions, be eating “dinner at midnight.” On tiptoe, Steve puts on the same record and conceals himself behind the curtains. Susan (Myrna Loy) enters the room, resplendently gowned, and wonders aloud to herself, though in tones clearly meant to be overheard, that the music being on is “funny,” since it wasn’t playing when she came in. Responding in a theatrically deep, exaggeratedly masculine voice, Steve playfully suggests that “maybe some *man* just put it there.” “It would have to be a man who knew exactly what I want,” Susan replies, before turning to embrace Steve, who has emerged from behind the curtains.

The two waltz theatrically around the apartment and are clearly besotted: the housekeeper calls them “lovebirds” (recalling the cartoon songbirds of the opening animated titles sequence) and we learn that they have been married four years. Escaping to the privacy of the bedroom, away from what Steve calls the “cross-city traffic” of the housekeeper’s commentary, his attempts to kiss Susan are playfully rebuffed, under the anxiety that they will smudge her lip rouge. “Stop it! Stop it! I’m a married woman! I’ll tell my husband,” Susan cries, as Steve tickles her to the floor. They kiss, and Steve tells her some “great news”: “I’ve decided to keep you for another year.” We learn that the couple has sworn to spend every anniversary doing exactly what they did when they were first married, a tradition that Susan clearly loves and Steve has somewhat tired of, regarding it as something of a “rigmarole”: it involves a four-mile walk to the Justice of the Peace for a glass of sherry, then Susan rowing Steve along a river, then Steve reading their future in the stars, followed by dinner, and culminating in what we are clearly made to understand as lovemaking: “Oh yes... *that*,” Susan

acknowledges cryptically. Steve's suggestion is that they do their entire routine tonight in reverse, which would of course expedite this particular activity. His scheme entails doing each constituent part in reverse too, including the dinner: Steve informs the housekeeper, who is flummoxed by the instruction to prepare to serve dessert first, finishing "with the soup," but eventually complies.

3. Back in the room, the couple fondly recollect the events (the winding of a clock, Steve stubbing his toe on the dresser, and so on) of their wedding night. Just after the lights have been turned out, and the screen goes black (drawing a tactful veil over their lovemaking), the doorbell rings. An irritated Steve answers the door to a singing telegram, wishing him a "happy anniversary," after which his mother-in-law (Florence Bates) reveals herself. Pushing her way into the room, she lays out her gift of a new, circular rug for the entrance. The married pair exchange meaningful looks, and we learn that an identical rug had been given the previous year, which didn't suit them because the floor was "too hard and polished." Mrs. Cooper wheedles her way into staying for dinner, which the couple have resignedly consented to eating in the regular order, before sending Steve on an errand to mail a letter. On his way out, Steve slips on the new hallway rug, banana-peel-pratfall-style (echoing Loy-as-Nora-Charles's similarly sprawling screen entrance in *The Thin Man* [1934]), to Mrs. Cooper's unconcealed delight.

4. After mailing the letter, Steve is surprised to find Isobel Grayson (Gail Patrick), an old flame, in the elevator. Clearly delighted to see him (greeting him with "Hello, Sugar..."), she tells him that they are neighbors. After the elevator again grinds to a halt, there are no magic charms pronounced and the three passengers are forced to escape through the roof. Steve is pressed into various compromising positions helping Isobel through the narrow passage, not least of which is having her feet on his face while he holds her pumps. (At which point she gleefully reminds Steve that the last thing he said to her was that "you weren't going to let me walk all over you.") The other two reach the roof, but after the machine begins to restart, Steve gets his head trapped in the elevator doors and is dragged painfully, humiliatingly, up and down on the same floor, before being licked by a passing dog. Eventually, they emerge on the correct

floor, and Isobel takes Steve by the arm into her apartment, telling him that he needs a drink after his ordeal.

5. Still dazed, Steve realizes that his tie is constricting his breathing. “I still feel like I’m choking,” he says, in the high-pitched, womanly voice he will later deploy in the role of “Steven’s sister.” Isobel loosens his tie and ministers to him, evidently delighted to be in his company. “This is like old times,” she says, before tickling him affectionately. We learn that her husband is an artist, who occasionally uses a female mannequin (whose presence Steve notices, in an observation that will later be crucial) as a model, and that she is often “bored” being left alone. After trying to cajole Steve into “playing hooky” by “bend[ing] an elbow with the old gang” down at the bar, he makes his escape back to Susan. A disappointed Isobel calls out that he hasn’t merely been *married* since she last saw him, but “embalmed.”

6. Still flustered and ruffled, Steve reenters his own apartment, where the two women have been waiting with concern. Mrs. Cooper is immediately suspicious of his elaborate story of the broken elevator, and shrewdly, shrewishly, notices his missing hat, which Steve tells her he must have left in the elevator. She rings the lobby and asks that the missing hat be brought up immediately by the elevator boy.

7. During the subsequent dinner, the housekeeper interrupts with the news that the hat has been found in Mrs. Grayson’s apartment. Steve is forced into a hurried explanation, which rouses suspicion for both his mother-in-law and Susan (who recalls that Isobel gave him a black eye upon learning of their own engagement). After the housekeeper announces that Mrs. Grayson requests the return of her shoes, the two women grow even more suspicious. Nothing Steve can say in his own defense sounds plausible, and Mrs. Cooper eventually prepares to leave, in order to collect her sister from the train station, before also slipping on the new rug. Her pride wounded, she claims to have sprained her ankle, and Steve consents to stay to look after her while Susan leaves to collect her aunt.

8. Taking a much-needed break from amusing his mother-in-law, Steve heads outside for some fresh air, where he sees Isobel on the balcony below. She entices him out for a drink, arranging to release him from his obligations to Mrs. Cooper by calling him with what will sound like an urgent business call. (Unbeknownst to Steve, Mrs. Cooper has overheard the entire exchange.) After their ruse has played out, Steve hurriedly takes his leave, supposedly in order to attend to a business matter with an “old rascal” named J.B.

9. Susan returns to the apartment at 11.05, as revealed by an insert shot of the mantelpiece clock. Steve is still not home, and Mrs. Cooper smilingly, disapprovingly, tells her everything. A subdued Susan farewells her mother and rings the Grayson apartment: Mr. Grayson is equally alarmed that his wife and Steve Ireland are out on the town together. Acting under an impulse that she will later feel to have been beneath her, Susan suggests that if Steve were to walk in on her and Mr. Grayson kissing, she “wouldn’t have any more trouble with him.” Grayson agrees, similarly eager to chasten his own spouse, and invites Susan to his apartment.

10. Susan unknowingly enters the wrong apartment, where Ward Willoughby (Jack Carson), a “World Champion” archer practicing drawing his bow in an undershirt, is confused by Susan’s forthright compliments (“My! You *are* good looking...”) and her suggestion that he turn out the lights. A comical series of misunderstandings ensues, in which the two share a whiskey and embrace at several points in which Susan thinks she hears Isobel and Steve returning home, before quickly breaking off. Susan eventually realizes her error, and breaks free, running in to Steve and Isobel in the hallway. The two pairs try to explain themselves, and Isobel prompts Steve to fight Ward: “If you were half a man, you’d knock his head off.” Mr. Grayson enters from the elevator, and the explanations and accusations descend into an indecipherable chaos. Steve, hoping that levity will relieve the tension, breaks in with a loud, Groucho Marx-like interjection: “Oh, I know what: let’s room together all through school!” The four others break away and Steve is left running for Susan in the elevator. Racing to catch her, he gets his nose caught between the doors.

11. Back in their apartment, Susan tells Steve she doesn't think she can bear to learn "what really happened tonight." She interrupts his flippant attempt at an explanation and tells him not to proceed "if it's a lie—I couldn't forgive that." She ends up listening to a brief explanation, and says, halfheartedly, that she believes him. Yet later on, in bed (following the puritanical strictures of the 1930 Production Code, the couple sleep in separate beds), the darkness is once again disturbed when Steve puts "just one little question" to Susan, asking why Willoughby was wearing nothing more than an undershirt in the hall. "He has to have his torso free when he shoots his bow and arrow," Susan replies, either innocent or playing at being innocent of the double entendre that makes Steve snap on the bedside lamp.¹⁵ The two are clearly distrustful of the other's explanations, but eventually turn off the lights. The darkness is disturbed yet again by a ringing telephone: a waiting taxi for Steve Ireland, ordered at 9.30. Susan is inconsolable, and tells the driver to wait for *her*. Packing her things, she tells Steve that the call was nothing less than "the end of the world." Steve helplessly tries to persuade her to stay, and to stop crying. "I'm not crying," Susan says before leaving, "And if I am, it's because I think that twelve o'clock at night's a pretty rotten time to start my life over again." Call this the end of Act 1.

12. We find ourselves in a lawyer's office, where Susan is seated, attempting to look as composed and as dignified as she can (considerably so, of course, given what Maria di Battista calls Myrna Loy's "unaffectedly regal" mien).¹⁶ She is filing for a divorce this very day, and is impervious to the appeals of both Steve and the lawyer. When the latter claims to be lost for words ("I don't know what to say..."), Steve says that "There's everything in the world to say," proceeding with a long monologue on the grotesquery of divorce and defending the institution of marriage, as well as claiming that Susan has been too swayed by "circumstantial evidence" that is "unfair" and "doesn't take everything in to account." ("Possibly," she concedes. "But it was quite conclusive.") After hearing his professions of undying love, Susan counters that she will "never again believe anything you say." Alone with George afterward, Steve says he is con-

15. For a detailed account of the PCA response to this film, and the negotiations and compromises with the filmmakers, see Jane M. Greene, "A Proper Dash of Spice: Screwball Comedy and the Production Code," *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2011): 45-63.

16. DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames*, 134.

vinced that he could talk his way back into the marriage, if only he had enough time. Happily, he learns that the trial will not be for another two months.

13. The next shot is rolling footage of a “Divorces Files” list, which scrolls through countless names (“Allen vs. Allen,” “Arnold vs. Arnold,” and so on) until reaching “Ireland vs. Ireland.” Two months have evidently not been long enough, since we now see Steve in the office of his architectural firm, looking miserable and preoccupied. He has no idea where Susan is: a montage of private investigators around the country reveals that Susan is still at large. (It will emerge later that she has been hiding out in Arizona with her mother and Ward Willoughby, presumably in preemptive defense against her own susceptibility to Steve’s pleas.) Later, George phones to tell him that Susan has just shown up at a nearby party, and Steve races over. Managing to get Susan alone, she is pleased to hear of his distress. She concedes that their shared pain speaks to the love between them, but is unmoved, telling Steve that “there’s no such thing as marriage based on deceit.” Then, yielding slightly in spite of herself, she says that there is nothing she couldn’t forgive if he would only tell her the truth. When Steve admits to being guilty of having had a drink with Isobel and being in her apartment, she is furious, calling him a “despicable cheat” and retracting her earlier promise. She leaves with Willoughby.

14. In order to prolong the case, Steve hits on the plan of orchestrating an insanity defense, in which the courts will rule that he is mentally unfit to attend the divorce trial. A series of farcical capers ensues, including posing as Abraham Lincoln and “freeing” both a bemused black butler and all of the partygoers’ hats by sailing them on the pond. He also riles up one of the stuffed-shirt partygoers he dubs “General Electric Whiskers” (for his resemblance to the Italian General of the same name); and pushes Mrs. Cooper into the water. He himself is pushed in afterward, and wears a bed sheet wrapped around him like a toga while waiting for his suit to dry. Yet even after these exploits, most of the attendees think Steve is merely drunk. Looking for an unambiguous means of proving his “insanity,” Steve has a fortuitous encounter with a pet cockatiel who steals his watch and flies into a nearby tree. In his attempt to retri-

eve it, Steve slips from a window and loses his toga, exposing himself beyond frame to the entire party.

15. The next scene opens with Mrs. Bristol, the party's hostess, reporting the night's events to a courtroom, in which Steve continues his ploy of acting crazily, by assuming a vacant expression and flying paper planes around the room. Heedless of Susan's claim that the whole thing "is really a lot of nonsense," the judge rules that Steven is suffering from a "nervous breakdown," and orders a 30-day adjournment. During her testimony, Susan has told the court about Steve having previously "chewed up a phonograph record" of "the host's favorite rumba" at a party in Florida, and once, on their honeymoon, of putting on overalls to "dig a hole in the middle of Fifth Avenue." She also tells the court about Steve's having wanted to eat dinner backwards on their anniversary, and of his insistence that they follow "the wedding ceremony of the Batten Land Eskimos," all of which admissions are interpreted as further signs of his mental decline by the court.

16. Susan exercises her right to refer the matter to the Lunacy Commission, who diagnose Steve as either having "schizophrenia" or a "split personality." (The chief psychologist evaluating him is none other than "General Electric Whiskers" himself, who engages in some spurious phrenology around the "medulla oblongata" and brings forth more incriminating evidence from the party.) Despite admitting to the ruse to get his wife back, Steve is declared "insane," and ordered to be "placed under the care of his wife," with the divorce postponed for at least five years. Susan finds a loophole: she can commit Steve to a sanatorium, and thus be released of her obligation to care for and live with him. So ends the second act.

17. Steve is being forcibly committed to a Rest Home run by Dr. Wuthering (Sig Ruman), a pompous and stereotypically Teutonic psychologist who promises to "eradicate the source of [Steve's] troubles." While wandering the grounds, he sees Willoughby in Steve's car beyond the fence. Willoughby taunts him by making a blubbering idiot noise by wiggling his forefinger across his lips, a child's signifier of insanity, before Steve runs inside to catch Susan speaking with the doctor.

18. Susan is in the office, insisting on Steve's sanity. The doctor ridicules her claim to "know what is behind all this" and suggests that he is getting progressively worse, since he has become "a kleptomaniac" and may even be in danger of attempting suicide. "Oh, doctor! If that were the truth, I wouldn't leave him here another minute," Susan replies, suddenly unsure of herself, "I'd take him home and nurse him night and day." Steve has overheard this exchange from outside the office door, and takes a mounted trout from the wall as he enters, bearing a melancholy expression. After Steve requests a kiss, the doctor encourages it, though Susan resists. Steve kisses her in the middle of her protest—"that makes my head feel so much better. Can I have another?" Again Susan refuses, but Steve kisses her a second time at Wuthering's encouragement. "I've got to get out of here. The rules are too one-sided," Susan says, before running out.

19. Some time has passed. Steve is out in the garden, where he steals a gardener's ladder to try and escape. Ward Willoughby, again just beyond the fence, mocks his attempts. He informs Steve that Susan is planning on heading back to Arizona and leaving him interred unless he can somehow get the divorce case brought forward. Disgusted, Steve calls him a "fake Hiawatha," and threatens him again: "One of these days, I'm going to spread you around like warm butter." Willoughby laughs off the threat, and begins practicing some "archery exercises" while he waits. Thinking fast, Steve plays at being an Indian (complete with a reversed cap and broom-horse) and manages to have Willoughby interred on the grounds of being an escaped patient.

20. Willoughby soon escapes, using a rope that allows him to drop clear of the fence and leave Steve hanging upside down by the leg. After the staff arrive, they assume the dangling Steve has tried to kill himself, a view confirmed by Wuthering. Trying to prove that he was in fact trying to stop a man from escaping, Steve uses the same trick on Wuthering, who is likewise left hanging upside down while Steve finally escapes.

21. Back at Steve's apartment block, he makes it to the elevator seconds before the police enter the lobby. Upstairs, we watch Susan learning that he has "tried to kill Dr. Wuthering" and is now being "regarded as definitely homicidal." She is not convinced

by this interpretation, and is only concerned for Steve. The police know he is in the building, and begin their search.

22. Desperate for a place to hide, Steve enters Willoughby's apartment, narrowly escaping via the balcony to Isobel Grayson's. Isobel helps him, but is worried that her husband (who is in the bathroom) will discover him. Steve hides in the shower, and is scalded with hot water as Mr. Grayson prepares to rinse his hair. Steve escapes again, and spies Mr. Grayson's dressed mannequin and two bosom-shaped yarn balls in the next room. Stroking his mustache thoughtfully, he has clearly hatched an idea.

23. Upstairs, in the Ireland apartment, Willoughby is comforting Susan. Chastened, and softening her voice, she says that she wishes to talk to Steve. She asks him to get the police off the scent and give Steve a chance to get to her.

24. Still in the Grayson apartment, Steve has shaved off his mustache, applied thick makeup and lipstick, and changed into a matronly costume. He positions the yarn balls and adjusts his wig.

25. Isobel, Willoughby, and others are either assisting the police or putting them off the scene—it's hard to tell which. While the apartment block is in a commotion, Steve, using a warbly, womanly falsetto, asks Isobel whether they have "caught the murderer." She doesn't recognize him at first, but then smiles tenderly, and tells him to be careful. In a brief interaction with Willoughby, during which she is aghast at being taken for Steve's mother, she snippily corrects him, saying that she is his sister. Steve rides the lift up to the apartment one more time, leaving Willoughby to remark to Isobel, "That's the screwiest old dame I ever saw."

26. Upstairs, Steve introduces himself to the waiting police as "the unfortunate man's sister," enters the apartment and, when the police have gone, reveals himself to Susan. He professes his love and gives an account of what his devotion to her has led him to do, but still she holds onto the unexplained taxi cab on the night of their anniversary. Steve tells her he spent the whole evening talking about her with Isobel, and

simply forgot about the waiting taxi after walking to the bar. He proposes that they fly to Canada tomorrow morning for “a second honeymoon,” but Susan, still unconvinced, says she will not go with him.

27. Willoughby raps on the door, telling a group of officers “That’s his voice....” Susan lets Willoughby in, but speaks sharply to him, and covers for Steve. Mrs. Cooper enters as well, giving a shocked “ooh” at the sight of the police. Meanwhile, an officer has walked in on “Miss Ireland” adjusting her stockings in the bedroom. Embarrassed, he retreats, but Miss Ireland enters the living room and introduces herself to the gathering as Steven’s sister from Saskatchewan. The police are dismissed by Susan, who then turns to Willoughby, still persisting in claiming that she must know where Steven is, and protests that he is only trying to stop her “making a fool of [herself].” “Suppose I want to make a fool of myself,” Susan replies. Willoughby and Mrs. Cooper both try to prejudice her against Steve, but Susan is distracted by noticing Miss Ireland’s visible garter, which she subtly tells her to fix. The camera follows Steve’s fumbling recovery of the garter: Susan conceals the movements by holding out her dress, and the other two continue to complain about Steve beyond the frame.

When Willoughby calls Steve “a stinker,” Miss Ireland leaps to her brother’s defense, but is stuck on some difficult piece of feminine clothing. Mrs. Cooper offers to undress her and help resolve the problem, to which Susan and Steve hurriedly protest that this will not be necessary. When Miss Ireland then takes Willoughby to have threatened her, there is a comic sequence of first slapping and then punching him twice against her better judgment. Miss Ireland says that it is her duty to defend her brother: “Steven is my own flesh and blood!” “He certainly *is*,” says Susan—a quip that only we and Steve comprehend. When Willoughby calls Steve “a fake, and a cheat, and a bad sport,” he receives another slap. In reply to Mrs. Cooper’s startled remark about her “hasty temper,” Miss Ireland says that it runs in the family, and that “Steven once nearly killed three men with his bare hands.” Willoughby accuses her of lying: “Why if I were a man I’d knock you down for that,” Miss Ireland says, before delivering a proper uppercut punch that sends Willoughby flying. Susan, growing more and more amused, again contorting herself bravely—*gallantly*, even—to conceal Miss Ireland’s slip from showing, before Miss Ireland explains to Willoughby that the

voice he heard was from the phonograph, which she now puts on. It is the same song as in the opening scene, and a close-up reveals that a piece of thread from her clothes is caught on the needle and is slowly unspooling.

28. Willoughby leaves to search the apartment. Susan defends Steve to her mother, but says, “I don’t love him. I just don’t want Steven hunted and hounded like a common criminal, when all he’s done is, is...” “—is try to prevent you from divorcing him, any crazy way he could. Just because he loves you too much to let you go,” Steve supplies. Susan tries to dismiss Willoughby and her mother, but not before the latter has admitted her dislike of Steve, and for Miss Ireland to suggest that her interferences might be part of why the marriage dissolved. Finally noticing the snagged thread on the phonograph, which he sees is slowly causing one of Steve’s “breasts” to shrink, Willoughby races off to fetch the police, tripping over the hall rug (the third person to do so) and knocking over a large vase. “Good heavens,” Miss Ireland says, in her most schoolmarmish tones, “what a stupid place for a rug!”

29. Willoughby tries to convince the police that Steve is upstairs, but is recognized by the asylum staff as the patient who escaped over the fence that very afternoon. He is baffled to find himself being dragged away.

30. Upstairs, Miss Ireland is still yet to realize that her bosom is rapidly diminishing, though Susan tries several times to alerts her. In the course of trying to warn her, during which she makes the universal finger-rotating-around-the-ear motion for craziness, which Steve first interprets thus as a reference to Mrs. Cooper, before realizing that she is referring to the winding of the thread. Miss Ireland says that she has “a woman’s intuition” that Steve and Susan are “meant for each other”—“you either feel it or you don’t,” she tells Mrs. Cooper, disapprovingly. “And I feel it right here,” clutching her hand to her breast, which she now realizes is missing the crucial yarn ball. “Do you?” says Susan, archly, still uncertain of what she can let herself believe. Smiling, she directs him to the missing skein.

31. In the final moments, Miss Ireland says that she will “retire” to bed, heading for the master bedroom, though Susan pointedly directs her to the guestroom. Mrs. Co-

per tells Susan, *sotto voce*, that she doesn't like Miss Ireland any more than she does Steven, and vows to spend the night in the apartment, "bunk[ing] in with your guest" to prevent her from "influencing" Susan. Again bringing up the fatal anniversary night, Mrs. Cooper tells Susan that she saw Steve and Isobel "walking up the street, as bold as you please," which finally convinces Susan of the pair's innocence, unbeknownst to her mother. Susan realises that she has known the truth of Steve's innocence all along: "You saw them walking along the street and you never told me!?" "Well why should I?" her mother replies, "You knew he was with her." Susan is startled into momentary speechlessness, before exclaiming, "Why yes of course I did! Of course I did!" She spins her mother around so that their positions are camera positions are flipped: now Mrs. Cooper is on the left of screen, Susan on the right. After directing her mother to sleep in the master bedroom, Susan says that she will take Miss Ireland back to Saskatchewan in the morning. "All right," Mrs. Cooper says, "but I hope you get a good night sleep." Laughing cryptically to herself, Susan knocks and is invited in by Steve, who is offscreen but still using womanly tones.

32. After a dissolve (the only one used in the film, and clearly indicating that the couple have either just made love or are about to), we see Willoughby making his one and only call before being locked away. A cut back to the bedroom shows a ringing telephone on a bedside table that also contains a glass lamp, Miss Ireland's wig, and a large and unmistakably vulva-shaped shell. Susan answers on a cut back to Willoughby, who has a swollen right eye from one of the earlier punches and is trying to explain his predicament. His tone suddenly changes: "Hey... who is this?" he asks, at what we understand is now Steve's voice on the other end of the line: "what are *you* doing there?" On the same discreet, bedside table shot, an out-of-frame Steve makes the blubbering-idiot sound used earlier, before reaching his arm down to hang up the phone.

I. Marriage as Madness

One of the central revelations of this film is that marriage involves voluntarily living within a kind of madness—or at least what the external world is likely to take for

madness. By choosing unpredictability and comic disorder as a form of life, the couple's world will at times look like one governed by insanity. The films of this genre remind us that there is something truly outrageous—perhaps palatable only to unhinged minds—about the arrangement of marriage itself. Each comedy foregrounds the sheer improbability of two people committing to each other against all the odds, cleaving for better or worse, despite what they might subsequently learn about each other and themselves. Needless to say, the peculiar logic that keeps them together may well be at risk of breaking down at various points. In *Love Crazy*, the fragility of this logic is made clear in the unlikely chain of events that causes such a break. Steve's hurried defense to Susan and Mrs. Cooper, about his being waylaid by a broken elevator and a subsequent series of mishaps, clearly stretches the limits of their credulity. How much of his unlikely story is Susan obliged to take on faith, and how much is she right to be skeptical of? How many improbable explanations can a marriage withstand? Yet what could be more improbable, the film asks, than the very state of being married?

The central plot hinges on the misrecognition—by the court, by the Insanity Commission, and by Mrs. Cooper, among others—of Steve's mind as being diseased and unsound. It is the contents of his mind, and his very character, that are being put on trial. Yet the only data the court has to go on are his recent "attacks" of impulsivity and oddness. "They weren't attacks, they were just *fun!*" Susan exclaims to a baffled court. Steve is undeniably impulsive, comical, and fond of capers that have previously won him Susan's affections—but since they now they strike the court as evidence of an unsound mind and character, Susan herself is tempted to see them in a new light—as possible markers of Steve's lack of regard for consequences, or else a tendency to make light of things that demand seriousness. Yet Susan has also been driven crazy—with anger and resentment. She tells us that she wants to punish Steve, and it is in anger that she escapes to Arizona to live with her mother and Willoughby. She is also determinedly, stubbornly unmoved by Steve's pleas—a response clearly at odds with her own nature. She has been forced by the gravity of her suspicions of Steve's infidelity to experiment with a new way of being in the world, and it is not until the final scene, when she delightedly learns that her suspicions have been unfounded, that she is called back to herself and led out of confusion. It is only in this scene that she can acknowledge what on some level she has already known: that Steve's devotion to her

would make him immune to Isobel Grayson's charms. "I'm not confused any longer," she tells her mother before entering the room where Steve is waiting. Revealingly, she has just dismissed Willoughby by telling him not to discount the possibility that she wants to "make a fool of [her]self." Marriage, it seems, entails an appetite for a particular kind of foolishness and even insanity—but it is, crucially, an insanity of one's own choosing. By the end of the film, what we as viewers know, but what all other characters outside of this couple are oblivious to, is that what looks like insanity is in fact a shared form of freedom.

In *Love Crazy*, a significant aspect of this such insanity is an appetite for repetition, not merely in order to make peace with the prospect of seeing the same person day after day, but in repeating key moments of a shared life in the form of rituals. These rituals establish a narrative that is crucial to the pair's understanding of what it is that holds them together across the years. This is what Susan instinctively knew in her insistence that they carry out the same anniversary ritual year after year, and what Steve saw as being in need of reinvention, as registered by his suggestion that it be kept fresh by a reversal. The extent to which repetition and familiarity (Susan's more natural values) versus spontaneity and comic experimentation (Steve's) define their relationship is one that they will continue to work out. While such negotiations may well strike the external world as markers of insanity, the film is interested in what it means for a married pair to educate themselves and each other in the process of working them out.

As in the five films analyzed in *Pursuits*, *Love Crazy* also finds countless ways to dramatize the indignities and humiliations that will have to be endured for the married pair to find a way back to each other. These indignities provide yet further grounds for the external world's ruling that the marriage appears insane, but they are also crucial in allowing the couple to find a path back to each other. I will pick up on these humiliations in a later section, but for now I want to note the ways in which the genre tends to pit a conventional notion of dignity as a serious obstacle in the way of a necessary humbling of oneself before the other. For Cavell, it is one of the many "virtue[s]" of the heroes of remarriage comedies that they "be willing to suffer a certain indignity, as if what stands in the way of change, psychologically speaking, is a false dignity" (8). Is dignity overrated? Certainly standing on one's dignity, or holding

it too closely, or cultivating a “false dignity” is, as Susan Ireland discovers. She learns that her own studied performance of dignified coldness in the face of a perceived injustice (enacted primarily for Steve’s benefit at the party and at the lawyer’s office, among other settings) must be given up in order to laugh with her husband at the perpetual human tendency for error and misunderstanding. In other words, a tragic worldview is given up for a comic one. Susan’s eventual delight in Steve’s outrageous and elaborate performance of matronly femininity (a burlesque of female dignity) marks the point at which she has given up a certain vision of gendered respectability and is ready to laugh at herself and the world. Steve’s flamboyant cross-dressing performance allows Susan to see the ways in which her own attempts at dignity have also been performative, and a betrayal of who she understands herself to be. Susan’s obvious happiness in rediscovering her better instincts of generosity and openness (learning that “of course she knew” she could trust Steve) signals that she has overcome certain of her own weaknesses and shortcomings. She has learned to look smilingly on those character flaws she knows she lives with and has discovered, via Steve, that many of her shortcomings have been replicated from her overbearing mother. In doing so, she seems to take an amused and slightly resigned attitude toward the possibility of ever fully overcoming her own tendency to folly. Such an acknowledgment, this film suggests, is crucial in reaffirming a marriage.

The film also asks whether our own desire as audience members to see the marriage continue isn’t an equally mad or misplaced one. David Shumway takes it to be a token cynical commercial manipulation that “screwball comedies typically position the viewer as the subject of their romance so that he or she must feel marriage as the thing desired.”¹⁷ But is it something we are right to desire? Can we justifiably hope that such insanity be prolonged? In so relentlessly foregrounding the particular possibilities of unhappiness entailed within the married state, along with the countless misunderstandings that emerge between the married pair, don’t the films of this genre thereby acknowledge the extraordinary—perhaps ultimately impossible—effort required to maintain a marriage? Part of the genius of the films lies in their acknowledgment that we as viewers also need convincing of the viability of the onscreen marriage—and thus of the institution itself. We watch for signs that the couple is in-

17. Shumway, *Modern Love*, 82.

deed well-suited, that they are attuned to each other, and that there is indeed “no one else with whom they would rather quarrel.”¹⁸ But we also look for signs that the married state is, or can be, a desirable one—worthy of the continuous effort and unavoidable appearance of insanity it entails. Cavell writes that the couple must understand themselves as a “rich and sophisticated pair who speak intelligently and who infuriate and appreciate one another more than anyone else” (*Pursuits* 18). Undertaking this particular project may well appear as madness to the world beyond the couple, yet *Love Crazy* finds a way to affirm it as the best of all possible worlds.

II. Marriage as Improvisation

Part of what the external world beyond the pair mistakenly sees as markers of insanity is merely the result of the necessary improvisations on which a marriage relies. The pairs in this genre all share (or else discover) a delight in improvisation—a perpetual appetite for being surprised by the other. In the midst of the fatal courtroom scene, the gathered witnesses look scornfully on Susan’s admission that Steve, on their anniversary, suggested doing the entire elaborate evening backwards, chalking it up as further evidence of his mental decay. To a gathering of objective and dispassionate onlookers, the suggestion seems unhinged. But what, in a marriage, can be legitimately done backwards? And what must be done conventionally? What is the married pair free to invent and improvise between themselves, and which social norms still need to be upheld? These are questions that the marriage will keep on throwing up, and on which agreements will need to be reached.

One of the striking features of a remarriage comedy is that no member of the audience could chart an easy path for the pair to find their way back to each other. The return should seem impossible, and as though it will take a miracle to effect—in this genre, a secularized miracle, refigured as a series of improbable hijinks. But the very improbability of *Love Crazy*’s hijinks (the cross-dressing, the false imprisonment, and so on) speak to the ways in which the marriage itself must be continuously improvised, left open to the vagaries of chance. In the narrative before us, chance has

18. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 18.

ultimately tended in a fortuitous direction, though of course there is no guarantee that it will always do so. (Indeed, in the opening scenes of comic misunderstanding, it is happenstance that has driven the pair apart: without a slip on an unwanted rug, a broken elevator, and a mistaken entry into the wrong apartment, there is no quarrel to set the plot in motion). Being married, the film teaches, entails accepting an alarming degree of randomness, and acknowledging that unforeseen events may well fundamentally alter a relationship. This awareness is at the heart of Cavell's implicit claim that marriage is a perfectionist pursuit with no preordained endpoint but rather a series of shared aspirations, in which what the pair aspire to is a richer and more meaningful union. It is as much a verb as a noun. As Steve and Susan discover, it may not always be "delightful to *be* married," but there are considerable delights to be found in the search for such a state. That this search is itself an unpredictable one, requiring countless improvisations along the way, is a fact that Susan and Steve learn to delight in.

III. The Privacy of Marriage

One of the key claims of *Pursuits of Happiness* is that there is no longer any external authority with which to authorize a marriage (not the church, says Cavell, nor the law, tradition, or children), meaning that the pair will have to find such an authority for themselves. An important implication is that there is likewise no authority who can pronounce an accurate *verdict* on the state of any given marriage: it is something that can only be understood and assessed from inside. Cary Grant's character, in *His Girl Friday*, ridicules all would-be external judgments, characterizing divorce as merely "some words mumbled over you by a judge." A similar contempt for such judgments is also present throughout *Love Crazy*. It is telling that both the court and the Insanity Commission find Steve to be of unsound mind, thus ruling his marriage to be—and in fact to have always been, since the court finds traces of his decline as far back as the wedding night, where he insisted on enacting the marriage ritual of the "Batten Land Eskimos"—likewise unsound. But their rulings are merely the most institutional incarnations of the film's many verdicts on the state of the Ireland marria-

ge: we have already heard Isobel Grayson liken the marriage to a stylized corpse (in her accusation that Steve has been “embalmed”) as well as Mrs. Cooper’s many uncharitable assessments of the pair. Even the housekeeper’s characterization of the Irelands as “lovebirds” in an early sequence is faintly irritating (to Steve, at least), implying yet another mistaken assessment of what these two mean to each other. Likewise, Dr. Wuthering will later make stern pronouncements on what will “cure” both Steve’s insanity and the marriage—he tells Susan both that she must kiss Steve whenever he requests her to do so and, revealingly, that she “humor” his every whim. (Dr. Klugel has issued similar advice earlier.) All such judgments, the film makes clear, are entirely spurious: they arise either from an uncharitable and ungenerous stance toward the couple, or else are rash verdicts and prescriptions based on what Steve has previously called “inconclusive evidence.” They claim to know far more than they have grounds for knowing. At the heart of the film is thus a question about who might rightly claim to be an authority on another person. Who, precisely, is in a position to judge another’s character? Who might pass judgment on how another inhabits the world? *Love Crazy’s* answer is that where a married couple is concerned, all external claims to such an authority are invalid, since they are inevitably done in the wrong spirit and are thus fated to misperceive the couple’s true character. The only person fit to judge the sanity or otherwise of Steve Ireland is his wife, and then only after she has regained her faith in their shared project of marriage itself.

We might well view such external judgments as allegories for the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that post-critique literary scholars have taken issue with in recent years, as a “mood” and style of criticism in which the interpreter assumes far too much knowledge and superiority over the object of interpretation.¹⁹ Beyond being merely benignly misguided, the external judges of the Ireland marriage make hasty and uncharitable assessments, presuming that they know far more than the couple do about their own state of affairs. If heeded, the consequences of their assessments would be disastrous. It is an interpretive stance that the camera itself warns us to take no part in, since it instead finds pleasure in granting the Irelands privacy away from the overly presumptuous gaze of the world, giving us ways to look upon this couple that are conspira-

19. Rita Felski characterizes such interpretations as inhabiting a certain “mood” in *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 20.

torially linked with both their own aspirations and their particular way of seeing each other. This viewing stance is particularly obvious in sly and strategically replicated shots of the couple's ploys in deceiving onlookers as to the true identity of "Miss" Ireland. When Steve's garter comes loose, for instance, or when his false bosom unravels, the camera delights in screening off Willoughby and Mrs. Cooper, and letting us in on the subterfuge. The camera lingers appreciatively on the couple's ruse and is clearly on their side, as by this point viewers of the narrative surely are as well.

By comically pointing out the faulty judgments of external figures, the film asks whether we as viewers, with our own far more substantial knowledge of both sides of the story (via dramatic ironies that give us more information on the other half of the pair), could justly adjudicate whether the pair should remain together. Are the Irelands really "meant for each other," as Steve (as Miss Ireland) claims? What verdict would we ourselves make? Is Steve justified in having gone out for a drink with an old flame on the night of his wedding anniversary? (Do the not inconsiderable irritations of Mrs. Cooper make this act permissible, in spite of Steve's knowledge of how it will surely appear to Susan?) Is Susan right to have hit so quickly upon the plan of orchestrating a scene wherein Steve and Isobel would find her and Mr. Grayson embracing? (Is her desire to "teach him a lesson" of this kind a justifiable reaction?) The film's conclusion, in which the door to the bedroom closes and we, like Mrs. Cooper, are locked out and on the wrong side, suggests that as viewers we ourselves might be almost as hapless as the court in judging the validity or otherwise of the marriage bond. Cavell reminds us of the essential hiddenness of all successful marriages, a lesson dramatized in one way or another in all the films of this genre.²⁰ And though the later sequence of bedside table shots will give us considerably more access to their private world than is granted to Mrs. Cooper, the camera only affords us a glimpse of a forearm, and two brief lines of dialogue. As Steve hangs the phone in its cradle and the screen fades to black, the pair retreat to a private sphere. (And will soon retreat to a sphere more private still—not the "green world" of Connecticut that so often provides the final resting point for the couple in such films, but Canada, the world that Susan and Steve, via the Eskimo rituals of their wedding night, are more at home.) They have at last escaped the "cross-city traffic" of both the external world (as set up in the

20. *Ibid.*, 195.

film's opening frame) and the social world of misguided judgments (signalled at the beginning by Steve's assessment of the housekeeper's misguided commentary) that only they themselves are in a position to make. There is an important sense in which the couple form an island, as their surname punningly suggests. It may well be the case that no (single) man or woman is an island, but a married pair might well be.

All of which is to say that marriage creates gestures and signs and a language that are fully interpretable by only two people, and will be impenetrable to those on the outside looking in, who will be forever bound to misunderstand them. The film gives us more access to the world shared by the couple than that of any other character, though we are of course still held at a discreet remove. Such a notion extends the familiar idea that we love those with whom we share adjectives, and in whose language we become more and more expert, such that we can arrive at a point at which we know precisely what another person means by *generous*, say, or *kind*. (Which may be as close as we ever come to having a private language between two people.) What does *trust* mean between this pair? What does it mean to be *confused*? Just as Adam and Amanda Bonner, in *Adam's Rib*, "invent gallantry" between themselves, as Cavell says, the Ireland (again, Island) couple will have to negotiate these meanings privately, in order to find the particular virtues and understandings that will sustain and be useful to them.

IV. Scenes of Instruction

There are other important moments of instruction in the film. Steve, for instance, comes to understand that certain crises in a marriage cannot be laughed away, as he has attempted in the face of Susan's serious questions about his evening with Isobel Grayson. (Serious, that is, to *her*; not yet serious to him.) Indeed, Steve's cavalier response to the events of the ruined evening only deepens the wound. Changing tack, Steve has also tried soothing Susan in placating tones reminiscent of those he used in the elevator, as to an obstinate horse; but in this case, the object of his linguistic caresses is not nearly as pliable. Other male protagonists in adjacent films within the genre have also tried laughing off the complaints or suspicions or accusations of their wives, all equally to no avail. Adam Bonner, in *Adam's Rib*, for instance, tries to laugh

off his wife's long-pent grievances about gender inequalities in their profession, as does Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday*, who repeatedly makes light of Hildy's various complaints. But these are not grievances that can be so lightly dismissed. The "new woman," as Cavell dubs her, must be heard out—her desires acknowledged, her questions, complaints, and enthusiasms treated with the seriousness she brings to them herself.²¹ Indeed, the lightness of response on the part of these uncomprehending husbands brings about further separation. Unable to comprehend the extent of their own shortcomings, failures, and thoughtlessness, they require instruction from their wives. Each of them bears what Cavell memorably characterizes as "the taint of villainy," which though it cannot be expunged entirely, can be lessened by the right sort of wife.²²

And yet the wives in these films are also themselves instructed: what they learn, and have need of learning, varies dramatically from film to film, but in *Love Crazy*, Susan is schooled in the role that trust might play within a marriage. "There's no marriage without trust," Susan tells Steve bitterly at the garden party, referring to what she understands as Steve's lies about Isobel but unwilling to recognise the cautious trust he has placed in her unlikely explanation of her own evening with Willoughby. Susan here exhibits what Tracey Lord, in *The Philadelphia Story*, calls "the wrong kind of imagination"—a tendency to suspect the worst, by uncharitably interpreting a spouse's behaviour.

Though Susan wishes to "teach Steve a lesson," it is she herself who the film will also find ways of schooling. Eventually, Susan will realise that she has known the truth of Steve's innocence all along. She rediscovers her innate impulse to look at him generously, lovingly, even—at times—indulgently. Across the film, Susan has been testing an intuition: her sense that Steve has very likely betrayed her with Isobel Grayson. What a relief to discover that she has been wrong! And that she can therefore return to the generous impulses that are more native to her disposition. (The particularities of Loy's comportment and face are crucial to this transformation, which makes full use of her ability to convey a haughty and self-consciously dignified detachment from the world, yet with a lingering suggestion that she would throw away

21. *Ibid.*, 16.

22. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 216.

such dignity for wild laughter or passion if given half a chance.²³) It is significant that Susan is also schooled on her sexual and romantic desires. As with almost all the other heroines in the films Cavell places in the genre, Susan toys with the idea of taking up with a completely different kind of man, one who represents—by virtue of his conventional masculinity, his lack of true appreciation of her, as well as his unintelligence and unwillingness for conversation—a serious regression. (It is telling that Willoughby is unable to recognize Steve under his costume until the very last moment.) Susan will eventually take herself to have been temporarily insane for having ever entertained the possibility that he could be a suitable partner. Maria Di Battista notes that one of the primary flaws of the analogous Ralph Bellamy character in *The Awful Truth* is that he can't distinguish between a guffaw and a laugh, and certainly can't appreciate one of the "grand laughs" that Irene Dunne and Cary Grant enjoy together.²⁴ Willoughby is also deaf to this distinction: he laughs in the wrong ways and at the wrong things. His comedic tastes are for simple mockery, as in the delight he takes in his childish impression of blubbering idiocy. (It means something very different, something far more sophisticated and ironic, when Steve returns the gesture in the final scene. The last laugh enjoyed by Steve is a world away from Willoughby's cruel snickers.) Willoughby also laughs mirthlessly at things he is unable to comprehend, as in his repeated response—"Say, you're kind of funny..."—in the face of what he understands as Susan's attempts at seduction. Susan's increasing impatience with Willoughby has much to do with his deficient sense of comedy and understanding. The smile that Myrna Loy works hard to repress during Steve's cross-dressing performance is the final lesson in what constitutes the right kind of laughter.

Love Crazy also finds ways of transforming Susan's excessive pride, along with a tendency to stand on her dignity. Myrna Loy played with her "unaffectedly regal" appearance masterfully across the course of her career, but does so in particularly ex-

23. For more on Loy's peculiar expressions and filmic demeanour, see Leider and DiBattista, who notes that "[a] laugh was always lurking in her eyes, the happy product of some distillation of high spirits. Such qualities make Loy the most *companionable* of modern women—witty, unaffectedly but unmistakably intelligent, and reliably good-humored" (136, italics in original).

24. DiBattista is particularly sharp on the threat that such a figure poses within these comedies: "Marriage to the 'wrong' man is the original sin of the comic world, because it is through marriage that comedy signals its commitment to a social future populated by happy, compatible, and, it is hoped, fruitful human beings. Comedies often flirt with the 'bad' marriage to show us the difference between irreversible moral collapse and the happy fall of comedy, by which young lovers lose a false pride in themselves to gain a true sense of what they are worth to each other" (21).

pert ways here. One senses that perhaps more than anything else, it is Susan's pride that has been wounded by what she suspects to be Steve's philandering. She has fallen in her own estimation (earlier, she has sought assurance from Steve that she is a not "the jealous type"), in part because her marriage is not on as firm a footing as she believed. She is also perhaps too attracted to predictability, as her love of repeating exactly the same wedding night rituals on every anniversary makes clear. She is enough of a good sport about many of Steve's ludicrous capers, including his suggestion to enact their evening in reverse, but is instinctively less spontaneous, less inclined to fun. Steve's corresponding weakness is an excessive flippancy, a tendency to treat others' emotions and reactions frivolously, and an often-misguided impulse to search for comic ways out of disagreements that are simply insoluble by such means (as during the hallway fracas, when he suggests that the five of them "room together all through school!"). He is perhaps also too attracted to spontaneity and improvisation, as his proposed reversal of the anniversary night ritual makes clear. These are not necessarily fatal flaws within a tragedy, but they are evidently fatal enough to the prospect of sustaining the "meet and happy conversation" that is their marriage.²⁵ Both Susan and Steve want the other to recognise and acknowledge their particular virtues and shortcomings. Finding a way back together will involve finding new ways of appreciating precisely these particularities.

The film is also eloquent on the dangers of complacency for a successful marriage, the learning of which comprises yet another important scene of instruction for the Irelands. This theme is heralded in the very first scene, in which Powell reprises a song from *The Great Ziegfeld*—"It's Delightful to be Married"—whose sentiment speaks to a perhaps unearned self-satisfaction, and an untroubled delight in an arrangement that takes its pleasures for granted, as something that can be eternally counted on. (The song's later lyrics rashly anticipate a child and a love that endures until old age, when "I will be a gay old party / You will be a grand old dame.") Such uxorious sentiments, the film suggests, while not entirely misplaced, run the risk of leading Steve into a position of complacency, and are thus in need of modification. Is it really delightful to "be" married? Is the state of being married an ever-desirable one? Or is

25. Cavell, "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and *Now, Voyager*," *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (1990): 216.

it only in the never-ending affirmation of marriage, in the continual *choosing* to be married (as Cavell says), that one might have a chance of discovering delight? One is a form of stasis, a static endpoint; the other is a perfectionist process, a becoming. Of course, it also matters that there is no narrative left once one has reached such an endpoint. Narrative is only possible if the couple continually discover on what grounds they might be said to “be” married. The film asks whether singing such a song wholeheartedly might be an admission of having been “embalmed” (as in Isabel’s haunting accusation) rather than being *married*. Would it be to consent to a life of inertia, rather than a dynamic and ever-shifting conversation? It is significant that all three times this song plays, something goes horribly, comically wrong—first the broken elevator, then the arrival of a meddlesome mother-in-law, and at last the unraveling of a false bosom. It is as if the film finds its purpose in undoing the song’s overconfidence, renouncing its hasty celebration of a state that requires real work to sustain. *Love Crazy* teaches that a successful marriage requires vigilance—a healthy fear and respect for all that might go awry—in ways that the song does not allow for. One suspects that Steve, having learned such a lesson, will have no further use for this particular tune—as has been prophesied by the footman in the opening scene.

V. Marriage and the Performance of Gender

Why does *Love Crazy* end on such an extended cross-dressing scene? Its sheer audacity and length are extraordinary: it goes well beyond the fleeting uses of such male-to-female performances in other films of the genre, as in Cary Grant’s brief moments wearing Susan Vance’s furred gown in *Bringing up Baby* or Adam Bonner’s portrayal of womanly tears in the final scene of *Adam’s Rib*. In full makeup and costume, Powell plays a woman for an astonishing seventeen-and-a-half minutes, in a performance so convincing that it fools Willoughby, Mrs. Cooper, and a roomful of police officers. Indeed, it is remarkable that the scene escaped censorship, since even in script form it struck the Production Code Authority as containing “[o]ffensive sex suggestiveness and perversion,” a suspicion that was later confirmed as unequivocally

“suggesting perversion.”²⁶ And what does it mean that Steve dresses as a Victorian matron, with the infamous sexual repression this era implies?²⁷ The first thing to note is that the ruse goes on for far longer than is strictly necessary: both spouses are clearly enjoying playing the game, both for the affordances of truth-telling it allows (as in Steve’s gleeful disapproval of the rug, and in rebutting Mrs. Cooper’s uncharitable claims against her “brother”) and for the experimental relation it situates them in with respect to each other. (This scene is the culmination of the logic of improvisation that they have both followed throughout.) It is also worth noting that since Mrs. Cooper is staying the night, Susan’s plan to take Miss Ireland back to Saskatchewan in the morning will surely entail further roleplay: they will presumably have to leave the apartment under Mrs. Cooper’s watchful eye, and make it out of the building without being detected.

(I want to bracket off the likely objection that Powell’s performance is inherently disrespectful—that it mocks queer or transgender identities. The same performance in a 2020 film might justifiably be read this way, but it would be anachronistic to read such hostility or deliberate offence back into this film. I will leave a queer reading of this scene to others, and try instead to interpret it on its own terms, as a wildly inventive solution to the problem of how to draw a number of complex plot strands together.²⁸)

Is this final drag scene an argument for seeing gender itself as being nothing more than a kind of a performance, along Butlerian lines? Is it a suggestion that we are forever doomed to dramatize social conventions and expectations of those constrictive mannerisms, speech types, and behaviours that supposedly ought to characterize being a man or woman? This would be one possibility, but Steve’s performance also serves to remind both of them that they are in fact freer in these gender roles than they have previously realised. Elizabeth Kraft is right to posit the creation of a “new man” in these remarriage comedies, alongside the “new woman” heralded by

26. For a detailed account of the PCA response to this film, and the negotiations and compromises with the filmmakers, see Jane M. Greene, “A Proper Dash of Spice: Screwball Comedy and the Production Code,” *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 3 (2011): 45-63.

27. Leider points out that Myrna Loy as Nora Charles disguised herself as a man to search a warehouse in a scene that was cut from *The Thin Man*, but there is no such experimentation with gender (in the figures of either Loy or Powell) in this series.

28. Lee Wallace’s recently published *Reattachment Theory: Queer Cinema of Remarriage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020) offers a fascinating account of queer films in light of Cavell’s remarriage themes that may very well offer a productive template for this kind of reading.

Cavell, and this scene seems in part to be a means for Steve to discover what such an identity will consist in.²⁹ Part of what he signals is a willingness to sacrifice aspects of his masculinity—traditionally understood—for the right kind of woman. As in the Woolf epigraph, he aims to show Susan that one can indeed be a “woman-manly, or a man-womanly.” Clearly, Steve has become at least temporarily more like a woman, with what has traditionally been taken (and which Mrs. Cooper herself understands) as feminine emotions, speech, and behavioural stylizations, as well as patriarchally embedded beliefs, such as the duty to defend men’s honour (in this case her “brother”).³⁰ Likewise, Susan might be said to have been taught by the film’s narrative to become more like her husband’s version of masculinity, with a fondness for hi-jinks and games, and a willingness to laugh in the face of authority—not least of which is the oppressive authority of a mother. And there is yet another aspect of education in these scenes, since surely parts of Steve’s performance will linger on: he has played at being a woman, with all the physical difficulties and unwieldy accoutrements such a social position entails, and will surely bring some of that knowledge into his understanding of his own masculinity and marriage. The couple also acquire knowledge about the nature of trust: there may be “no such thing as marriage based on deceit,” as Susan has said to Steve, but this particular deception saves the marriage, since it is part of what allows Susan to realise the depth of Steve’s devotion and her own unconscious replication of behaviors that the culture takes to be inherently feminine. She has been given a distorted funhouse-mirror image of both her mother and herself, which has stunned her into deeper self-recognition.

The performance also lets Susan realise some further differences between her own gender possibilities and those available to Mrs. Cooper, and it is significant that in *Love Crazy* the new woman comes into the world right under the nose of an overbearing and uncomprehending mother. By burlesquing Victorian matronly disapproval, with its readiness to pronounce rash moral and character judgments, Steve allows Susan to see her mother’s profound shortcomings. “You have more influence over Susan than you realize,” Miss Ireland warns, adding, significantly, that Susan may equally be “more influenced that she realizes as well.” (Revealingly, Steve mi-

29. Elizabeth Kraft, *Restoration Stage Comedies and Hollywood Remarriage Films: In Conversation with Stanley Cavell* (London: Routledge, 2016).

30. It is also significant that William Powell had to shave off his trademark moustache for this role.

mics Mrs. Cooper's patrician pronunciation of Susan's name—as "*Syou-san*"—while in character.) For the marriage to resume, Susan must first acknowledge and then free herself from her meddling mother's hold over her own imagination.³¹ That Steve can so easily parody and pass for such a woman speaks volumes on how stilted, affected, contrived, and conventional the Old Woman really is. A New Woman would not be so easy to play.

In an earlier scene in Dr. Wuthering's office, Susan was well and truly justified in complaining that the rules governing the relation between the genders are "too one-sided." But how might one go about correcting them? One solution offered by the film is to have a husband feel, even briefly, what it means to be taken for a woman, and to have to behave *as* a woman. Steve's willingness to play this role is the culmination of a string of alternately virtuosic and hammy performances across the film: he has already played at being a Native American, a Roman senator, a teapot, and Abraham Lincoln, among others, as well as the obvious performance of insanity that has duped medical professionals. Steve has also already demonstrated that he can dial his masculinity up or down as required, as in the opening apartment scene where he responds in an exaggeratedly deep voice. His earlier suggestion that he and Susan turn everything on its head is here fulfilled in a vaudevillian parody of gender conventions.

It is also worth noting again that the camera becomes much more obviously on the Ireland's side during these final scenes. In the scene in which Willoughby and Mrs. Cooper are bitterly chronicling all of Steve's failures, as a man and husband, the camera takes no part in their complaints, and like us, is far more interested in the fun that the married pair is having while concealing their shared deception. The camera lingers appreciatively on the couple's ruse and is clearly on their side in the dress-unraveling sequences. (There is a visual echo, in these moments, of the way in which the camera lets us in on the ploy used by Irene Dunne to win custody of Asta in *The Awful Truth*.) And one feels the camera's joy even more acutely in the final moments, when during a long two-shot, Susan takes her mother firmly by the shoulders and switches positions with her. In this strange sequence, the both women make a 180-

31. Cavell notes that the father figure in remarriage comedies is always on the side of the daughter's happiness, so it is significant here that no father is present (or even mentioned) and that Susan's mother is either knowingly or unknowingly against her daughter's happiness.

degree about-face, such that Susan moves from being on the left of screen to being on the right. Prosaically, this shift occurs because Susan wants to cut off the possibility of her mother walking in on Steve undressing from his costume, but it also works as a powerful visual metaphor for the New Woman quite literally replacing the Old. She corrects their positions before the camera's eye, such that they correspond to the universal placement of "Before" and "After." The advances in female consciousness and understanding that Cavell and others have traced throughout the 1930s is here made concrete, and our delight at this switch is one of the most purely pleasurable moments in the film. Susan is no longer "confused"—she has shed her allegiance and devotion to her mother's anachronistic worldview, and is ready to reaffirm a new way of life with her husband.

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In responding to *Love Crazy* throughout this essay, I have been trying to follow an intuition that the film has much to tell us about marriage. It seems to know particular things about the married state, doing its thinking from within the medium of an early-1940s Hollywood comedy. For all of the reasons I have given, I take this film to deserve a place within Cavell's canon of the very best comedies of remarriage, since it is equally capable—alongside *Adam's Rib*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Lady Eve*, *The Awful Truth*, and *Bringing up Baby*—of revealing philosophical, cultural, and matrimonial knowledge. *Love Crazy*, like the other films of this genre interpreted by Cavell, attempts a "feat of philosophical imagination" that has gone woefully underappreciated.³² We err gravely in our habitual assumptions that such films are mere frivolous confections, or else noxious vehicles of patriarchal or capitalist ideology. This film is far from "froth." As crazy as the claim will doubtless seem to some, *Love Crazy* is endlessly insightful on the delights and difficulties of marriage.

32. James Conant, "An Interview with Stanley Cavell," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 68–69.

6. Friends and Strangers:

A Conversation

REX BUTLER

CATHERINE WHEATLEY

“I write for friends and strangers.” So writes Stanley Cavell in *Little Did I Know*, misquoting Gertrude Stein (who in fact wrote for herself and for strangers).¹ Cavell long wrestled with uncertainty about how his books would be—and had been—received, with whether he could make himself understood to his readers. The friends who share his conviction that everything—art, language, autobiography—matters, and that we must try as best we can to communicate with others. The strangers whose minds are more mysterious still, but to whom he felt a duty to reach out. On the occasion of the publication of our respective books, *Stanley Cavell and Film: Scepticism and Self-Reliance at the Cinema* (Bloomsbury, 2019) and *Stanley Cavell and The Arts: Philosophy and Popular Culture* (Bloomsbury, 2020), we read one another’s work and were moved to begin a conversation. Here, we speak to each another about finding Cavell, the tricky business of interpretation and the future of Cavell studies.

REX BUTLER (RB): I’ve just finished reading your book *Stanley Cavell and Film: Scepticism and Self-Reliance at the Cinema* (2019) for the third time and was struck once again by how clear and measured it is. There are lots of similarities between our approaches to Cavell, but unfortunately your book arrived too late for me to make much use of it in what I have written. Probably no one will believe that! But I guess I’d like to begin by asking when and how you first came across Cavell’s work. There are, of course, quite a number of important British interpreters of Cavell. Was his work in the atmosphere when you started your PhD, for example?

1. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 444.

CATHERINE WHEATLEY (CW): Thank you for your kind words, and for sharing your book with me—sadly too late for me to respond to it in what I wrote either! Perhaps this conversation is a way of making up for that missed opportunity on both our parts.

In answer to your question I first came across Cavell around 2004 while I was writing a PhD thesis on the films of Michael Haneke and the ethics of film spectatorship (which was the basis for my 2009 monograph *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image*, 2009). I was casting around for philosophical approaches to film and came across *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*, and from there I found *The World Viewed* and *The Claim of Reason*. I can't say I was immediately captivated by all of Cavell's film-related work—I'd been thoroughly trained in a close-analysis approach to film that was very oriented to the technical language of cinema—thinking about editing, camera movements, the details of *mise-en-scène*, and of course Cavell completely rejects that way of talking about film. So, while I found there was something really wonderful in his version of perfectionism that really helped me unlock Haneke's films and my responses to them, at the time I wasn't quite convinced by his method of criticism. In fact I think I wrote in that book words to the effect that Cavell was largely uninterested in film form, which Lisa Trahair rightly took me to task for in an article she published on automatism and Cavell.²

It was really only after I'd finished my PhD that I came to a deeper appreciation of his work. In 2006 I read *Cities of Words* and *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, and also attended a conference at Cambridge, in the Faculty of English, called "Acknowledging Cavell: His Multidisciplinary Legacy," where I was lucky to hear papers by Alice Crary and Stephen Mulhall and to make the acquaintance of Andrew Klevan, who along with Stephen has been one of Cavell's most incisive commentators in the UK. Interestingly, 2006 was not only the year of Cavell's eightieth birthday, but also the year that the *Film-Philosophy* journal and conference was founded. That journal has gone on to really shape the field and the conference has been a terrific pathway for me to meet other scholars interested in the conjunction of philosophy and film and in Cavell as a kind of founding father of that endeavour.

2. Lisa Trahair, "Serious Film: Cavell, Automatism and Michael Haneke's *Caché*," *Screening the Past* 38 (2013), <http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-38-cinematic-thinking/serious-film-cavell-automatism-and-michael-haneke's-cache>.

RB: Well I suppose following on from that I'd want to ask what first drew you to his work. There are moments—we'll come to that in a moment—where as a feminist you obviously take a certain distance onto him. Did you immediately like what he was saying or was he something of an acquired taste? Did he in any way stand against what you felt to be the dominant sensibility of your peers? Or even the way you were thinking at the time?

cw: I certainly don't think Cavell was very fashionable at the time I first encountered him. Certainly not in the way that, say, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek or Gilles Deleuze were. Or indeed Emmanuel Levinas, whose ethical philosophy has brought been into relationship with film in very rich, productive ways by scholars such as Sarah Cooper, who edited a special issue of *Film-Philosophy* on Levinas and Film in 2008. (It wasn't until 2014 that Robert Sinnerbrink edited a similarly themed issue on Cavell and Film). But also I had the feeling that the scholars who had engaged with Cavell—former students such as William Rothman and Sandra Laugier, or those who were early to respond to his work, like Andrew and Stephen and Robert—had done so in such a rich, thorough-going manner that it was hard to not be overwhelmed by their work. I found it a real balancing act, writing the book, to interweave their lucid appraisals of Cavell with my own responses to his work.

RB: One of the more extended aspects of your analysis is the question of woman in Cavell's work. You comment on what Cavell understands as the dissymmetry between the sexes in the comedies of remarriage and you take up the much-discussed matter of Cavell's thinking of the place of woman in the female melodramas. In particular, you conclude your analysis of King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937) by following Robert Sinnerbrink's suggestion that Stella's actions at the end of the film when she leaves her daughter and walks offscreen are to be understood neither as the film's erasure of Stella nor as a self-conscious decision by Stella herself. You precede this by taking us through the long history of feminist objection to Cavell's reading of the melodramas in general, to which you are broadly sympathetic. A hard question, but how would you try to summarise how you stand with regard to Cavell's relationship to the femi-

nine (and feminism), and how do you see this playing out in his reading of say *Stella Dallas*?

Similarly—and I had not really put my mind to this before I read your book—you raise the question of race in relation to Cavell's reading of the famous shoeshine scene in Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953), in which Fred Astaire dances with a black shoeshine man in an amusement arcade. Here too Cavell's reading of the sequence has been criticised by some and defended by others. How do you think Cavell's interpretation of it in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* stands up today in contemporary America?

CW: Those are tricky questions!

To begin with matters of gender, female experience is central to much—if not all—of Cavell's work on film, not least because he believes film to show a far greater interest in its female subjects than it does in its male subjects. Film is, “about the creation of woman, about her demand for an education, for a voice in her history.”³ And yet, at the same time, such perspicuous critics such as Tania Modleski have claimed that in Cavell's film-philosophy women's voices are ultimately silenced. My own sense is that Cavell tries—not always successfully, it should be said—to heed female voices, and to pay attention to the ways in which they are silenced, and in which they speak. This is a theme in his writing on Shakespeare as much as it is on films such as *The Awful Truth* and *Stella Dallas*. In his essay on the latter, in particular, Cavell clearly struggles to appropriately respond to the woman's voice while at the same time attempting “not to *explain* the woman's thinking, to enable us to know what she knows; [...] to listen to her voice in order to enable a sort of understanding—an understanding beyond explanation—to take place.”⁴ Surely this is good advice for us all: that we try not only to *spea*k better, but also to *listen* better?

This leads me on to the second part of your question. I have absolute sympathy with Cavell's passionate defence of what he calls Astaire's dance of praise in his essay on *The Band Wagon*. And at the same time I find Robert Gooding-Williams' critique

3. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 134.

4. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 234.

of it as perpetuating institutional racism very persuasive. The question what constitutes an ally is a very difficult one, and not necessarily one that I feel best qualified to speak on, but it is important that we continue to pose that question, even if we risk exposing ourselves to criticism. We learn, after all, through failure. Naomi Scheman's beautiful essay "A Storied Life" seems to me to express beautifully the ambivalence I feel about some of Cavell's claims to speak for others, both in terms of gender and race.⁵ There she concludes that it is an open and vexed and question whether any one of us can speak for all of us: whether there is, in any interesting sense, an unbounded, human we at all. Many would answer no, and go on to say that, perhaps for that reason, there cannot and should not be philosophy at all—or at least not in the way we have known it. And yet giving up on the possibility of general claims is the final roost of privilege. Whether any of us can, in good conscience, enter a claim on another's behalf depends of course on a complex initiation of acknowledgement and recognition. But the ethics of the I / you is, ultimately, not an acceptable replacement for the political address of the we.

With that in mind, I think Cavell's philosophy, and his film-philosophy in particular, might have great value for critical race theory. Acknowledgement, for example, has become an absolutely key political term in the current moment, not least in discourse centred around film. Take Joaquin Phoenix's BAFTA speech—in which he famously calls out systemic racism. He says there: "I don't think anybody wants a handout or preferential treatment. People just want to be *acknowledged* and appreciated and respected for their work." Likewise I recently watched a very moving video of what's called a "privilege walk." The idea is that a group of diverse individuals stand in a line, and each take one step forward every time they have benefitted from social norms, and one step back every time they've been disadvantaged or discriminated against: there are a few of them online and they are a sobering watch. At the end of this particular one the person left furthest back—an Indigenous Australian man—tells the others that "it's not a competition of who has it the worst, or the best or the most or the least—it's about *acknowledging* it, it's about recognising it."

5. Naomi Scheman, "A Storied World: On Meeting and Being Met," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Richard Eldridge and Bernie Rhie (New York: Continuum, 2011), 92-105.

This call for an acknowledgement of difference, of seeing the other for who and what they are, and for changing our behaviour in the light of that acknowledgement, is at the heart of so much of Cavell's philosophy. It shouldn't be a great leap to thinking about racial difference, sexual or gender difference in these terms. And one of the things that I find so crucial in Cavell is his emphasis on the importance of disagreement. It's ok not to see things the same way: indeed, this is how we learn from one another. Simply walking away and saying "I'm not going to persuade her, so why bother trying"—*this* is the ethical failure. It's crucial to Cavell that we find our voices, and attempt to make them heard, but also that we listen to other voices—that we have good pitch, as he puts it. In an era of cancel culture, no-platforming and internet communication, where it's easier than ever to retreat into political echo-chambers, acknowledgement is a lifeline.

RB: One or two more questions. Like any author, what do you wish, now that you've written the book, you'd paid more attention to? What strikes you as a potentially underdone area of Cavell's relationship to film? Or to put this another way, what are you working on now? What has writing your book opened up to you?

CW: As you've mentioned, I tried to be attentive to—and a little bit testing of—Cavell's approach to gender and race within the book, and I'm really pleased that the book comes across as pushing back a little on some of Cavell's claims. I think Cavell himself is aware of the limits of what he calls his "representativeness." In his final, autobiographical work, *Little Did I Know*, he worries about his ability to speak for others, making reference specifically to women. But I rather fudged the question of sexuality.

To some extent, this is because Cavell himself fudges the question of sex. Marriage is configured as a kind of special friendship, and gender is important within that, but he says so little about love and eroticism—partly because the couple have to be childlike, and partly because they have to be childless: the stakes of marriage can't have to do with the perpetuation of the patriarchal line. At one point in *Cities of Words* he tries to draw a more or less straightforward comparison between Platonic friendship and marriage—which seems to me surely wrong. (When he talks about the exemplar he states that they must be distinterested, in terms of their relationship to

the one learning from them—but marriage should never be disinterested.) On the other hand, it's one of the important features of remarriage that it is precisely not a *coup de foudre* but something enduring—what we might call settled companionship. Is long-term love sexless? So many of the couples in the remarriage comedies are strangely chaste. You yourself say that they are able “to see the other clearly without the blinkers either of romantic love or sexual attraction.” Some critics—such as Sarah Churchwell—read sex as sublimated into the dialogue, given that these are of course all works produced in the Hays Code era. But that's not Cavell's line. So I'd like to give more thought to the importance of sex and romance and love and their relationship to one another in Cavell's philosophy.

Related to this, I am interested in looking at what productive relationship Cavell might have to Queer Theory. Not particularly as regards his engagement with Sedgwick in *Contesting Tears*, which I fear might court similar allegations of appropriations to those that Modleski makes in regard to gender, but in terms of how same-sex couples and queer relationships more widely might complement and problematise the idea of remarriage. Cavell raises this question at a few points in his writing, but always leaves it tantalisingly hanging. Lee Wallace, of the University of Sydney, has been doing some really interesting work on this topic, and I'm excited to read her forthcoming book, *Queer Remarriage*. I've also been reading Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* recently, and she makes heavy reference to Wittgenstein and the ordinary and domestic in relationship to queer experience. It strikes me that she might have something interesting to say to Cavell, and vice-versa—I'd like to try to bring the two together and see what it yields.

RB: You say at one point in your book that for Cavell it is not a matter of film simply dramatising ethical or philosophical issues. This would not be what a proper film philosophy would be. You then with regard to Cavell's notion of perfectionism set out how Cavell does practice a proper cinematic ethics. Can you perhaps elaborate this a little more? And maybe tell us why Cavell's work would not therefore fall prey to the accusation that it deals only with a “small corpus of films from a single national cinema,” i.e., that his notion of perfectionist ethics is culturally specific or relative?

cw: I do that say that, although on reflection I'm not sure it's entirely the correct way of putting it. What I meant by "ethical or philosophical issues" is what Cary Grant's character, in *His Girl Friday* (1940), calls "that ethics stuff": front page issues about abortion or the death penalty, or theoretical propositions like the Trolley Problem. That is not what Cavell or the films that he writes about are interested in. But they are interested in questions of what it is to live a good life, to be a good person, and these are philosophical issues of a sort, too. Perhaps I might have better said that these films dramatize the philosophical question of how best to live in the world under current conditions. As Cavell puts it in his essay "Moral Reasoning" these films show us that "the moral life is not something constituted by isolated judgements of striking moral and political problems but is a life whose texture is a weave of cares and commitments in which at any time choice may present itself in pondering which you will have to decide whose view of you is most valuable to you."⁶

Now we might think about such questions away from film, of course. However, film's focus on the ordinary details of human life, on relationships and conversations and interactions, its particular focus on vision and visibility and what is not visible but must be discerned, poses these questions in a new and pressing manner. And while for Cavell, the Hollywood comedies and melodramas he writes about are a particularly striking, complete and let's say North American, example of how film engages with ethics, they are not the only examples. After all, Cavell also writes about Rohmer's *A Winter's Tale* (*Conte d'hiver*, 1992), Chantal Akerman's *La Captive* (2000), Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (*Sommarnattens leende*, 1955) in some of these terms. Just so, I think Alain Gomis's *Félicité* (2017), Mia Hansen-Løve's *Things to Come* (2016) or Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* (2014) are all films that open onto perfectionism in fascinating ways.

But more than this, film demands that its viewers practice a particular kind of responsiveness or attentiveness or care. And that attention is in itself ethical. So as a medium it is ethical—or at least the good instances of it are, in that it asks us to take it seriously and for each of us to respond on our own terms. To be faithful to our experience of the film. In the book, I discuss this in terms of Cavellian criticism, but even

6. Cavell, "Moral Reasoning," in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 357

prior to this moment of writing or talking about film, there is a practice of Cavellian viewing that is inherently ethical.

RB: Finally, a bit more generally, how do you think Cavell stands today? There seems, even before his death, to have been an enormous resurgence of interest in his work. You speak very well in your book of how slow recognition was to come for Cavell's writings on film, but today he is one of the central figures of a new film-philosophy. What do you think accounts for Cavell's current reception? What felt need or lack, cultural or political, do you see his work as responding to? Do you think it is anything as simple as the end of post-modernism or the shortcomings of relativism? How do you think he speaks to an era of identity politics and the failure of progressive thought in many contemporary democracies?

cw: On the one hand Cavell has, as I say in the book, moved from the margins of philosophy, film studies, and literary studies, amongst other disciplines, to somewhere more central. I've lost count of the number of conferences and symposia on his work that have taken place in the last year, and of course ours are just two of several books coming out at the moment! On the other hand, it seems to me that a lot of the work on Cavell is still being done by the individuals whom you elegantly refer to as Cavell's supporters. And they are by and large working within in a very Cavellian tradition, both in terms of their approach to Cavell and the objects of their critique. It seems to me that Cavell hasn't been widely taken up and used in the same way that, say, Gilles Deleuze has. Where's the book on Cavell and Global Film? Or Cavell and the Digital? Of course, there are good reasons that these works haven't been produced, to do with Cavell's methodology—his work doesn't lend itself to being conceptualised and de-contextualised in the same way as Deleuze's does. I think that it's possible he's hamstrung by his own attachment to ordinary language and desire to avoid prescriptiveness. Put it this way: it's an absolute joy to teach Cavell, to teach students the kind of attentiveness that he calls for, but it's very difficult to set essays on Cavell.

But as I've said above, I think that there are a number of really productive directions for Cavellian scholarship to pursue, and I absolutely think that questions of acknowledgement and care should be at the centre of our conversations in the cur-

rent era. The French philosopher Luc Ferry makes the argument in his book *On Love* that until recently four great principles of meaning have dominated ethical thinking, and society as a whole: the cosmological principle, the theological principle, the humanist principle, and the principle of deconstruction. Now, he says, the dominant principle is that of love, which forms the basis for a new kind of humanism: not of reason and rights but of solidarity and sympathy. I think it's a position that's not a million miles away from Cavell. It all comes down to love again!

Now, I'd like to ask you some questions in return. I was really struck by the fact that you dedicated three chapters of your book to two of Cavell's key interlocutors—the film scholar William Rothman and art critic Michael Fried. Could you tell me a bit about what was behind that decision, and how you see their particular relationship to Cavell? Did you feel a similar weight of existing scholarship upon your writing?

RB: I'd admit to all kinds of interlocutors in my reading of Cavell. I suppose to begin with all of the other people I've read seriously: Baudrillard, Žižek, Deleuze... I came to Cavell through two distinct and maybe even opposed paths. On the one hand, I was intellectually formed by a period of post-modernism in Australian intellectual life, when "French theory" replaced the traditional humanities. On the other hand, as a practising art historian, I've always had a soft spot for modernism and the great modernist critics' privileging of "aesthetics." I first encountered Cavell's work when I started teaching a film course and set readings from his books on the comedies of remarriage and melodramas of the unknown woman. I later taught advanced courses putting together Cavell, Fried and Rosalind Krauss (more on whom later). Yes, I was utterly intimidated—and maybe even a little exhausted—by the mountain of writing on Cavell. I felt that to do anything worthwhile I'd have to try to break with it as strongly as possible. Needless to say, after you finish your book in a rush of inspiration and self-belief, you can see how much of what you said has already been said by others.

cw: In some of your questions on race and gender, you seem to be asking me, to some extent at least, where Cavell ends and I begin. Or to what extent I feel Cavell can spe-

ak for me. Perhaps I could pose that question to you. You write about the question of interpretation (referencing Cavell's "A Matter of Meaning It"). To what extent is what we're doing interpreting Cavell? How do you conceive of your relationship to your subject in writing a book like this?

RB: I have this very peculiar sense of what truly important thought does. It effectively "doubles" what is, proposing a new transcendental condition for things. Baudrillard puts forward simulation. Deleuze difference. Derrida *différance*. Cavell scepticism. Each major thinker has their own unique word for it, but the same gesture gets repeated. Of course, this is very different from the usual modest, incremental, conversational reading of Cavell as a democratic or egalitarian thinker who speaks in "ordinary language." But I think implicit in the idea of conversation for Cavell—and in Wittgenstein's language games, at least for Cavell—is this idea of doubling. Each successive statement in an authentic conversation seeks to speak the reason for the other saying what they did in an attempt to determine the conventions according to which they speak. Each in a way "re-marks" the other. And there is indeed something "comedic" in this, hence Cavell's fascination with the joke or witticism in Shakespeare, Beckett and the comedies of remarriage. So I see Cavell as a "great" thinker of enormous ambition and reach, like Nietzsche and indeed Emerson. And I have tried myself to respond to him in this spirit. The interpreter must themselves attempt somehow to "double" Cavell, which in fact for me was precisely and paradoxically to see him in this way. I nervously await Cavell scholars' response!

cw: My book is concerned with cinema—with how Cavell's cinematic education shapes his way of thinking and feeling. I mention opera and theatre and literature, but really only in so far as they relate to film. It seems to me though that, while film is at the centre of your book (literally—chapters four to six of ten in total focus on film), you also decentre it, placing it in a complex network of relations with the other arts, including theatre and photography. Do you feel that the tendency of scholarship to carve Cavell's work into subdisciplines—Literary Studies, Politics, Philosophy, Film Studies—does an injustice to his thought? To what extent is it important to take a ho-

listic view of his work? And how does one do that with a scholar who has written so broadly and so prolifically?

Related to this, and this is a question about your own approach to art perhaps as much as it is about Cavell's, what is the internal relationship between these art forms? I was struck by how your writing on Wittgenstein and family resemblance in the chapter on modernism seemed to describe very well the way in which Cavell thinks about genre. Cavell very often maps theatre or opera onto film, or poetry on philosophy. How successful do you feel this is as an approach? I suppose I'm asking you what is the importance of medium-specificity...?

RB: Of course, really powerful thinkers cross all disciplines, including ones they've never written about, so at once it's not surprising that so many of these disciplines have taken him up and the question is posed of what the "Cavell" in common to them all is. Could all of these disciplines, which perhaps have nothing in common, actually only have Cavell in common? There's an interesting question of "family resemblance"!

And I guess in another way we can ask after Cavell what painting and film have in common. In *The World Viewed*, at least at first, they are opposed. As Cavell writes in the chapter "Sight and Sound" there, in cinema the spectator is automatically set back from the screen, while in painting it is the painting that must seek to set itself back from the spectator. It is something like this that Fried draws on when he writes in his famous essay "Art and Objecthood" that cinema is not a proper art because it is not involved in questions of scepticism and its overcoming. But then, as Cavell says—and you cite this in your book—our "natural relation" to movies is broken and we are not automatically set back from the screen and film has to acknowledge the spectator and seek to set them back from the screen in a way it once did automatically.⁷ At this point, we might say that cinema becomes a properly modernist artform and equally, although Cavell does not explicitly spell it out, it is possible that other media can effectively function like movies, or rather that several "different" media in the old sense can be seen to be involved in the "same" problem of the spectator before a screen. Cavell himself hints at this when he speaks of the relation between film and television in

7. *Stanley Cavell and Film*, 64.

his essay ‘The Fact of Television’ and Rothman too when in his recent book on Hitchcock, *Must We Kill the Thing We Love?* he discusses both Hitchcock’s films and television series. The relationship between painting and photography is at stake in Fried’s *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (a fascinating title, insofar as previously in “Art and Objecthood” he approved only of the “individual arts” and not “art” as such) and Krauss in the last twenty years has begun thinking what she calls a “post-medium” that explicitly admits the possibility of “hybrid” media. In a complex way—and we could say a lot more about this—what is at stake is a certain *quality* (not a particular medium) that connects various instances of art that can then be understood to speak to and test each other. It is this that Cavell means when he says that “the later history [of a genre] must be told with this new creation as a generating element” in *Pursuits of Happiness*.⁸ It is this quality or set of characteristics that can be shared across different physical media, producing in effect a new medium. Krauss for her part will say that in post-medium art a particular medium re-marks several different media, and I think she is right in this. Of course, in principle, as each new member is added to this modernist lineage, it is seeking to be that single quality that all of the others must possess. Each new member, as it were, points to a new quality that reconfigures the old medium, producing a different past or cross-section of examples. A new comedy of remarriage, for example, could determine that children are possible and constitute a new genre, or at least meaning to the previous genre. This is what is at stake when Cavell says in *Pursuits of Happiness* that a genre emerges “full-blown” and yet it is always possible to add new members to it.⁹ And to put all of this in terms of “family resemblance,” I am reminded of Jorge Luis Borges’ great essay “Kafka and His Precursors”—Borges being another of my interlocutors in my reading of Cavell—when he speaks of “Kafka” being that “something in common” to a series of literary precursors that were previously seen to have “nothing in common.” “Kafka” for me here would be a perfect example of a new medium in literature.

cw: You argue very persuasively in your introduction that Cavell’s thought is not post-ideological, nor is it utopian, but is rather aporetic: that “scepticism and its

8 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.28

9 *Comedies of Remarriage*, p. 27.

other are not to be separated, but are as it were the world and its condition, which revolve around each other in a circle that constitutes the ‘very time and space’ of Cavell’s philosophy.” How do you distinguish Cavellian scepticism from other, earlier models of scepticism?

RB: Another complex and vexed question! Of course, there are a series of essays—I cite in my book Danièle Moyal-Sharrock’s ‘Too Cavellian a Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein’s Certainty, Cavell’s Scepticism’,¹⁰ but there is also James Conant, David MacArthur, Davide Sparti, Elli Friedlander, etc., etc.—that discuss how and to what extent the problem of scepticism is already in Cavell’s great philosophical source, Wittgenstein. That is, the question is raised as to whether the problem of scepticism is actually at stake in Wittgenstein or Cavell effectively reads it into him. Nevertheless, Cavell does see scepticism in Wittgenstein and, moreover, the decisive thing he sees in him is that he does not simply propose a solution to it or some way of living outside of it. Rather, everything we do is a response to a “prior” scepticism, and even when we feel we have overcome scepticism this is only another form of scepticism.

This is the whole problem or even contradiction of the “ordinary” in Cavell: the “ordinary” or some finality to scepticism must be striven for, but it also is unable to be named or any naming of it is only to plunge us back into scepticism. And, equally, after the hypothesis of scepticism, there is no before scepticism because this too can now only be thought as a certain overcoming of scepticism. We see this in Fried’s art history, where both that previous “defeat” of theatricality he spoke of is now understood as only something of a momentary truce and he keeps on having to go back further into art history to find a moment before the advent of theatricality because he could no sooner name any such moment than it would become theatrical. If the medium is always in a sense post-medium, so the pre-medium is already medium. And something like this is at stake in Cavell’s relation to the history of philosophy. Of course, in a way the entire history of philosophy can be seen as the successive attempts to overcome scepticism—Descartes, Kant, Hume...—but only after Cavell. The power of a pure doubling transcendental statement—which is something of a pres-

10 Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, “Too Cavellian a Wittgenstein: Wittgenstein’s Certainty, Cavell’s Scepticism”, in *Understanding Wittgenstein, Understanding Modernism*, ed. Anat Mater (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 92-110.

criptive or performative—is that, after it, what it speaks of appears as though always there.

cw: Questions of post-modernity and modernity, or post-modernism and modernism are at the heart of your book. What do you see the role of history as being? Can we ever abstract Cavell's philosophy from its historical context? And from here – where do you see it leading us? What is the future for Cavell, and of Cavell? You write elegantly about how we are to read Cavell today, but if we can't—as you rightly argue—abstract certain concepts like remarriage from their historical settings, then how do we do things with Stanley Cavell?

RB: To follow on from the previous question, I think that modernism or modernity in Cavell's conception of it is a decisive break in history. (Indeed, following Nietzsche's aphorism about breaking history in two, I would say that history itself is a certain breaking into two, dividing the world into history and what comes "before" it). That is to say, before modernism there is tradition, and in tradition there is no (consciousness of) history and therefore in Cavell's sense of the word no art. But after modernism we are in history and the perpetual struggle of art (and thought) to overcome scepticism and keep itself convincing. And precisely too, after modernism, the pre-modern can only appear as though already struggling with scepticism and the problem of artistic conviction. Modernism at once posits a time before it and does away with this time in its very thinking. So that, if we cannot extract concepts like remarriage from their history, it is also because they make, in their modernity, history itself. But also in a complex way—this is the other task of philosophy—we can try to step back from this history to think that gesture, that inaugural moment, that philosophical and artistic *fiat*, by which history becomes possible.

cw: A final question. Reviewing, revising, returning, repeating: these categories are really important to Cavell, who often revisits the same material across several articles and books. If you were to rewrite the book now, what (if anything!) would you change?

RB: Well, of course, according to perfectionism we always fall short and we always must begin again. We write to make up for the mistakes of previous writing. This is just as people speak in Cavell—and, indeed, you get the sense that this is why Cavell is often so long-winded and never-ending—to make up for previous misunderstandings. It is perhaps only in the act of speaking itself – or the actual process of writing a book – that we for a moment “overcome” scepticism. As soon as it is done, as soon as it is set down in writing, we are back in scepticism. But, of course, the two cannot strictly be separated. So I guess after this Cavell book I would like to write a book about Rosalind Krauss and her notion of post-medium. My hypothesis is that her late-90s post-medium writings are not in any way a break with her previous post-modernism and a going back to her original modernism, but that her work—like any significant thinker—is at once absolutely consistent and a perpetual argument with itself. This might be thought as something of an extension of what I have just written on Cavell, but really it’s a re-reading of it and indeed a re-reading of it so that it makes more sense to me.

Thank you for your questions, Catherine. Perhaps it’s even been something of a high-brow version of Cavell’s bantering couples. I’d like to say I was Clark Gable, but I’m probably more like Spencer Tracey!

cw: I’ll happily take Katherine Hepburn! Thank you too, Rex, for a terrific conversation.