

---

## Cavell Reading Cavell

*Must We Mean What We Say?* has been important in my life since I was Stanley Cavell's student half a century ago. But once I threw my lot with the fledgling field of film studies and found my voice writing philosophically about movies I loved, I rarely felt the need to open that book; I'd already learned from it what I required for my own work. When Marian Keane and I wrote *Reading Cavell's "The World Viewed,"* I did reread *Must We Mean What We Say?* to detail ways Cavell's little book about film continued its thinking. But that was twenty years ago. Since then, my writing has focused almost as much on Cavell as on film, but I primarily immersed myself in his late writings. When I returned to Cavell's first book to prepare for a paper I presented in 2019 at a conference at Boston University called "Continuing Cavell: *Must We Mean What We Say?* at Fifty," I was overwhelmed by the sense that Cavell's later thought is all there in his early essays, but no less by the magnitude of what separates them. What separates them is also what joins them: a body of work that movingly stands in for an exemplary human life.

In sorting through the emotions rereading *Must We Mean What We Say?* stirred up in me, it helped to have had a most reliable guide: Stanley Cavell. There's no better reader of Cavell, no better guide to reading Cavell, than Cavell. For his own writing—the way he wrote, why he wrote that way, and how, given what his writing *is*, it calls for being read—was one of his abiding subjects. The new preface he wrote for the 2002 edition of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, for example, is his profound response to returning, more than three decades after its publication, to his first book.

---

Revised from a paper presented at the "Continuing Cavell: *Must We Mean What We Say?* at Fifty" conference, Boston University, 2019. Many thanks to the organizing committee: Rob Chodat and Juliet Floyd (Boston University), Sandra Laugier (University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne), Naoko Saito (Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University), and Paul Standish (University College London, London Institute of Education).

This practice of returning to his earlier writings, continuing their thinking but from a transformed perspective, was essential to Cavell's philosophical enterprise. I am thinking, for example, of his new preface, written in 1998, to the paperback edition of *The Claim of Reason*; the innumerable passages in his books and essays in which he "goes back" to earlier writings, such as "More of *The World Viewed*," included in the 1979 expanded edition of *The World Viewed*, or his recounting, in "What Is the Scandal of Skepticism," of his use in *The Claim of Reason* of Descartes's Third Meditation. Then there is *The Claim of Reason* itself, in which part 4 responds to, departs from, and in that way continues the thinking in the first three parts, which he adapted from his earlier dissertation. And *Cities of Words*, doubly a return in that he adapted it from lectures for a course called Moral Reasoning he first offered at Harvard almost twenty years earlier, and because in it he returned to movies he'd written about in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*. But the definitive instance of Cavell reading Cavell is *Little Did I Know*, which tells the story of his life up to the completion of *The Claim of Reason*, a story in which the philosophical and the personal are inseparable. Then again, his late turn to autobiography was itself anticipated in his early writing. It was already a theme in *Must We Mean What We Say?* that philosophical appeals to ordinary language have a personal or autobiographical dimension.

*Must We Mean What We Say?* begins with a foreword, "An Audience of Philosophy," that exemplifies another of Cavell's ways of returning to his earlier writing. The last-written essay, it addresses the book as a whole and articulates a perspective only completing the rest of the essays enabled him to achieve. It is a foreword that doubles as an afterword and asks to be read twice—as if the reader's logical next step, after reaching the book's end, is to begin it again but from an altered perspective. "An Audience for Philosophy" does not, as Cavell's later forewords-that-are-also-afterwords will do, also chronicle the occasions of the writing of the individual essays in terms that, anticipating *Little Did I Know*, reveal the mutual implication of the philosophical and the personal. But, like them, it brings its book full circle and, to invoke Ralph Waldo Emerson, draws a circle around the circles drawn by the other essays, enabling *Must We Mean What We Say?* to take a step beyond the steps its individual essays take—as if, like Emerson's essay "Experience" as Cavell was to read it, the book gives birth to itself. That Cavell embraced this practice so early can be seen, from the perspective of his late writings, as a manifestation of the profound affinity with Emerson that he would come to recognize only in stages, to borrow a term from his preface to the 2002 edition of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, where he writes:

I understand the presence of notable, surprising anticipations to suggest something specific about the way, or space within which, I work, which I can put negatively as occurring within the knowledge that I never get things right, or let's rather say, see them through, the first time, causing my efforts perpetually to leave things so that they can be, and ask to be,

returned to. Put positively, it is the knowledge that philosophical ideas reveal their good only in stages. (Cavell 2002, iii)

When Cavell adds that it isn't clear "whether a later stage will seem to be going forward or turning around or stopping, learning to find oneself at a loss," he is not registering a concern that a new stage might be a step back. He is distinguishing three ways a philosophical idea might "reveal its good" (an odd locution that I take to be forging a link, which asks to be returned to, with his essay, then hot off the press, "The Good of Film" [Cavell and Rothman 2005, 133–48]). The three ways are going forward; changing direction—that is, undergoing a conversion; and—here his wording resonates equally with Ludwig Wittgenstein and with Emerson—"learning to find oneself at a loss" (Cavell 2002, iii). Cavell is saying that the philosophical ideas in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, as there expressed, were at an early stage of "revealing their good." They "left things" so that they might be, and *asked* to be, returned to, each such "return" being a new departure whose own "good" reveals itself only in stages.

In the new preface to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell observes that he was struck, in returning to the book's earliest essay, by "a double anticipation" in a formulation in which he speaks of Socrates "coaxing the mind down from self-assertion—subjective assertion and private definition—and leading it back, through the community, home. The sense of the philosopher as responding to one lost will become thematic for me as my understanding of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* becomes less primitive than it was"—and, I would add, this happened when he discovered Emerson. "The literary or allegorical mode of the formulation," Cavell adds, "is something I recognized early as a way of mine of keeping an assertion tentative, that is, as marking it as a thought to be returned to" (Cavell 2002, v).

In the new preface, he cites the wonderfully aphoristic line in "An Audience for Philosophy," "If philosophy is esoteric, that is not because a few men guard its knowledge but because most men guard themselves against it," both as a response to the call of students at the time for relevance in their studies—count me among them—and as an instance of his practice of invoking an arresting concept, like "esoteric," that "halted" him, made him learn to "find himself at a loss." The pertinence of this practice, he goes on, "I felt strongly in connection with ordinary language practice (how could we become alienated from the words closest to us?—but then again, from what others?), but which I would not be able to speak about with much consequence until years later" (Cavell 2002, xi)—until part 4 of *The Claim of Reason*, for a start.

In "The Avoidance of Love," Cavell remarks, "If philosophy can be thought of as the world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself, then one mode of criticism (call it philosophical criticism) can be thought of as the world of a particular work brought to consciousness of itself" (Cavell 2002, 313). The term "philosophical criticism" acknowledges a distinction between his readings of *King Lear* and Beckett's *Endgame*, which one might want to call literary criticism, and

the other essays, which are evidently philosophy, while affirming that the kind of criticism his readings exemplify *is* philosophy. But it was in a 1989 interview, when his philosophical ideas about these matters were at a later stage of “revealing their good,” that Cavell entered his memorable claim that “any place”—Cavell’s readings show that *Endgame* and *King Lear* are such places—“in which the human spirit allows itself to be under its own question *is* philosophy” (Fleming and Payne 1989, 59).

When criticism is of a work of philosophy, when it questions a work that is itself under its own question, it “allows itself to be under its own question,” too. Philosophical criticism *is* philosophy. And philosophy, as Cavell understood and practiced it, *cannot but be* criticism. In a work of *philosophical* criticism it is the work itself that is “at every moment answerable to itself, that is allowed to do the questioning, that allows the questioning to happen, that is compelled to answer candidly every question it asks itself—being so compelled is what “being answerable” means. Such a work renders moot the distinction between criticism and philosophy by bringing to consciousness of itself the world of a particular work *and* the world of its culture—the language, the form of human life to which the work gives expression.

In a 1999 Sorbonne colloquium organized by the indispensable Sandra Laugier, Cavell remarked that the study of film cannot be a “worthwhile human enterprise” if it “isolates itself” from the kind of criticism Walter Benjamin had in mind when he argued that “what establishes a work as art is its ability to inspire and sustain criticism of a certain sort, criticism that seeks to articulate the work’s idea; what cannot be so criticized is not art” (Cavell and Rothman 2005, xxvi). Nor, I would add, is it *philosophy*. A philosophical work seeks to articulate its *own* idea. But a philosophical idea, as Cavell would in stages come to recognize, “reveals its good” only in stages. I suppose it is the idea of this book, which I hope has some “good” to reveal, that every one of Cavell’s writings is a work of philosophical criticism. And that this cannot be separated from the feature of his writing this essay has so far dwelled on, that Cavell wrote so that his words could be returned to, *ask* to be returned to, enabling his philosophical ideas to “reveal their good” in stages. The “good” of his writing, for Cavell, was its efficacy in bringing the world of each work, the world of the entire body of his work, the world of philosophy, the world of his culture, our culture, *his* world, *our* world, to consciousness of itself.

*Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell observes in his 2002 preface, “freed me for I suppose the most productive nine months of my life, in which I recast the salvageable and necessary material of my Ph.D. dissertation as the opening three parts of what would become *The Claim of Reason* and completed small books on film and Thoreau. I consider those small books to form a trio with *Must We Mean What We Say?*, different paths leading from the same desire for philosophy.” Finding paths from the trio’s *achievement* of philosophy, however, proved problematic. In his preface to the 1999 edition of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell noted that he felt confident enough with his work in *Must We Mean What We Say?* to announce there the imminent publication of his dissertation. The rashness of this announcement showed itself to him when he completed drafts of *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden* and, as he puts it,

“the conclusions so far achieved in the dissertation revision seemed to me outstripped by those pieces.” Soon enough, he would discern “the direction” the revision was “hauling itself toward” (Cavell 1999, xxii). It “had to do with the connection of the two concluding essays of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, the reciprocation between the ideas of acknowledgment and of avoidance, for example as the thought that skepticism concerning other minds is tragedy” (Cavell 2002, xxxii). But how he might *arrive* at such a conclusion was “distinctly less clear.”

In his preface to the 1999 edition of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell tells us that to work his way through this blockage he began what he calls a “limited philosophical journal”—it was like a journal because, in his words, “the autonomy of each span of writing was a more important goal than smooth, or any, transitions between spans,” and because “there would be no point, or no hope, in showing the work to others until the life, or place, of which it was the journal, was successfully, if temporarily, left behind, used up” (Cavell 1999, xxiii). Returning to this passage after so many years, I was stunned by its uncanny similarity to Cavell’s description in *Little Did I Know* of the procedure he adopted to work his way through a comparable blockage when he was seeking to get his “philosophical memoir” on track. And what *Little Did I Know* tells us about the consequence of completing *The Claim of Reason* is that after his success in blazing philosophical paths between acknowledgment and avoidance, between skepticism concerning other minds and tragedy, between his “trio” and *The Claim of Reason*—his success in putting his dissertation behind him—he was never again to doubt his ability to go on within philosophy.

“Philosophy’s all but unappeasable yearning for itself is bound to seem comic to those who have not felt it,” Cavell’s 1981 essay “*North by Northwest*” begins. “To those who have felt it, it may next seem frightening, and they may well hate and fear it, for the step after that is to yield to the yearning, and then you are lost” (Cavell and Rothman 2005, 41). To put his dissertation behind him, Cavell had to find himself lost. *The Claim of Reason* declared his existence as a philosopher. That’s why *Little Did I Know* ends with that book’s publication. In turn, *Little Did I Know* brought to an end the period of Cavell’s life that began where the story it tells ends—the period in which he fully yielded to his yearning for philosophy. Writing the book that tells this story is inseparable from the story it tells. Telling the story brought its meaning home. *Little Did I Know* is not only “under its own question”; it finds the answer it seeks. With the writing completed, the life of philosophy of which it was the journal was successfully left behind—for good. For Cavell, philosophy had achieved its end. In writing *Little Did I Know*, Cavell’s way of “walking in the direction of the unattained but attainable self,” to again invoke Emerson, was by looking back. Then again, “looking back” was also a return—to a place he had never been.

In *The Claim of Reason*, Emerson’s name appears once, in passing, as it does in *Must We Mean What We Say?* In *The World Viewed* and, remarkably, *The Senses of Walden*, Emerson’s name rarely appears. The year he completed *The Claim of Reason*, 1978, was also the year he wrote “Thinking of Emerson,” following it two years later with “An Emerson Mood.” Cavell’s discovery of Emerson was a seismic event—as

consequential as *Must We Mean What We Say?*, which began his philosophical life; *The Claim of Reason*, which declared his existence as the only kind of philosopher who could have written such a book or could have wanted to; and *Little Did I Know*, which closed the book on his life in philosophy. *Pursuits of Happiness* invoked Emerson more than a few times, but had he written “Thinking of Emerson” and “An Emerson Moment” *before* beginning his book on the Hollywood comedy of remarriage, Emerson would surely have played as privileged a role as in *Cities of Words*, where Cavell returns to those films to continue thinking about them—the same again, only a little different. It wasn’t until the Moral Reasoning course he began teaching in the late 1980s, and the publication of *In Quest of the Ordinary* and *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and the essays later collected in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, that he acknowledged the full magnitude of Emerson’s importance for his own work and declared himself to *be* an Emersonian perfectionist, the way in *Must We Mean What We Say?* he had declared himself to be a modernist. Or had he?

In “A Matter of Meaning It,” Cavell embraced a distinction between the modern and the traditional, in philosophy and out. “The essential fact of (what I refer to as) the modern lies in the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of that enterprise, in the fact that this relation has become problematic.” The passage goes on, “The various discussions about the modern I am led to in the course of these essays are the best I can offer in explanation”—thanks to Emerson, his late writings will have a better explanation to offer—“of the way I have written, or the way I would wish to write” (Cavell 2002, xxiii). But nowhere does Cavell call himself a modernist.

I find a clue to this in his essay “*North by Northwest*,” which follows the line I quoted, which invokes philosophy’s “yearning for itself,” with “From such a view of philosophy I have written about something called modernism in the arts as the condition of their each yearning for themselves, naming a time at which to survive, they took themselves, their own possibilities, as their aspiration—they assumed the condition of philosophy” (Cavell and Rothman 2005, 41). *Must We Mean What We Say?* was, its essays assert, written from within a “modernist situation,” but that doesn’t make it modernist. If “yearning for itself” is philosophy’s *tradition*, what could *count* as modernism within philosophy?

When Cavell observes, in the preface to *The Claim of Reason*, that Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, “like the major modernist works of the past century at least, is logically speaking, esoteric,” he doesn’t say that it *is* a modernist work, only that, like such works, it seeks “to split its audience into insiders and outsiders (and split each member of it)” (Cavell 1999, xxiii). “A Matter of Meaning It,” in characterizing *Must We Mean What We Say?* as *modern* philosophy, suggests that its writing, like Wittgenstein’s, “seeks to split its audience.” But in *The Claim of Reason* Cavell leaves it an open question—an instance of “leaving things so that they can be, and ask to be, returned to”—whether his writing *is* esoteric in this sense. And when he does return to this question in *Cities of Words*, his answer is “No.”

In “A Matter of Meaning It,” Cavell writes, “Innovation in philosophy has characteristically gone together with a repudiation—a specifically cast repudiation—of most of the history of the subject. But in the later Wittgenstein, the repudiation of the past has a transformed significance, as though containing the consciousness that history will not go away, except through our perfect acknowledgment of it (in particular, our acknowledgment that it is not past.” Cavell adds, “‘The past’ does not in this context refer simply to the historical past, it refers to one’s own past, to what is past, or what has passed, within oneself. One could say that in a modernist situation ‘past’ loses its temporal accent and means anything not present” (Cavell 2002, xxiii). Wittgenstein describes his later philosophy “as an effort to ‘bring words *back*’ to their everyday use,” as though “the words we use in philosophy, in any reflection about our concerns, are *away*” (Cavell 2002, xxiii). Unacknowledged, history, too, is “away.” To acknowledge that history is not past is to bring it back, to acknowledge its presentness, which is—paradoxically, it might seem—to acknowledge its pastness, enabling it to “go away” in the sense that we can leave it behind; we are free to move on.

When Cavell adds that later Wittgenstein seems to contain the consciousness that “one’s own practice and ambition can be identified”—he says “identified,” not “pursued,” but for the modernist artist, as for the modern philosopher, *pursuing* and *identifying* one’s practice and ambition can’t be separated—“only against the continuous experience of the past” (Cavell 2002, xxiii). Using the word “one’s” rather than “his” acknowledges that this is a *general* feature of the modernist situation in which Cavell, too, finds himself. The word “against,” connoting opposition, seems to reinforce the word “repudiation,” as if to underscore that in a modernist situation a work can declare what it is, what it was intended to be, solely through its repudiation of the history it rejects. That’s how I used to understand “A Matter of Meaning It.” But that can’t be right. One of the leading philosophical ideas in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, an idea Cavell never stopped returning to, most consequentially in his discovery of his affinity with Emerson, is that history has to be *acknowledged*, not repudiated.

Fortunately, there’s another way of interpreting the word “against” in the formulation “one’s own practice and ambition can be identified only against the continuous experience of the past.” In the last chapter of *The World Viewed*, Cavell uses “against” in a way devoid of any association with repudiation. He invokes the concept of “the ground of consciousness,” the “further reality film pursues,” what he calls “the reality of the unsayable”—an “arresting concept,” if there ever was one (Cavell 1979b, 148). In characterizing the unsayable as the ground of consciousness, Cavell means “ground” as distinguished from “figure.” His point is that only against the unsayable as a background can the figures of consciousness stand out, be apparent to us, *identifiable*. Similarly, in the modernist situation the “continuous experience of the past” is the ground, the background, one’s practice and ambition require if they are to stand out, to be experienced, in the present, as figure. But then the past, too, must be experienced in the present, experienced—experienced *continuously*—as

present. For in modernism, as Cavell understood it, an art cannot but assume the condition of philosophy and, as he will at a later stage put it, philosophy is answerable to itself *at every moment*.

In *Little Did I Know*, Cavell tells us that after completing *The Claim of Reason* “going on” in philosophy was no longer problematic for him. If the “essential fact” about the modern is that “the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of that enterprise has become problematic,” how could he go on thinking of his work as modern, as opposed to traditional, philosophy? That distinction had become moot for him. And so, the words “modern” and “modernism” dropped out of his lexicon. And it’s no coincidence that this occurred simultaneously with his discovery of Emerson.

When writing *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell, like Wittgenstein, found himself in a modernist situation in relation to the tradition of analytical philosophy in which he had been trained. Reading Emerson opened Cavell’s eyes to the fact that he had also inherited, without realizing it, an alternative philosophical tradition, founded in America by Emerson, embraced by Emerson’s great reader Thoreau and, in Europe, Emerson’s devoted readers Nietzsche (and, through Nietzsche, Heidegger) and Bergson (and, through Bergson, Deleuze) and kept alive in American culture and in *himself* by the films he watched in the years going to the movies was a normal part of his week. Cavell didn’t find himself in a modernist situation in relation to *that* tradition. By the late 1980s he was ready to give a name—“Emersonian perfectionism”—to the way of thinking he had come to recognize as his own, no less than Emerson’s. In finding Emerson, Cavell found himself.

Then, thankfully, he was *really* lost.