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Stanley Cavell And Literary Studies: Consequences Of Skepticism

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1 Introduction

Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism

Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie

For over fifty years, Stanley Cavell has been giving voice to some of the most innovative and independent-minded philosophical ideas of the late modern era. By synthesizing lessons about ordinary language he first learned from J. L. Austin with the teachings of the later Wittgenstein, Cavell early on developed a radically original interpretation of skepticism that would go on to inform all his subsequent philosophical investigations. For Cavell, skeptical doubt about the external world or other minds is neither an intellectual error in need of logical refutation (as philosophy has traditionally assumed), nor an ill-formed worry that we might readily put behind us, but a reflection of the inescapable finitude that characterizes every human life. Skepticism is thus an existential condition that is inevitably lived, whether destructively or productively. Finite human beings are bereft of knowledge of metaphysical absolutes and given over always to the active claiming of reason, fruitfully or tyrannically, as may be. Tracing out the myriad manifestations and sometimes tragic, sometimes comic consequences of the truth of skepticism in various regions of human life and culture, Cavell has throughout his long career produced a remarkable series of adventurous and wide-ranging reflections on philosophy, literature, film, and music.

Nowhere is the revolutionary promise of Cavell's novel approach to philosophy more evident than in his numerous, and justly famous, interpretations of literary texts, from Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Thoreau's *Walden*, and from Emerson's "Experience" to Beckett's *Endgame*. The art of attentive, careful reading lies at the very heart of Cavell's conception of philosophical method; reason can be claimed productively only through patient attention to, and apt modification of, past efforts at such claiming. The philosopher's activity therefore resembles the compositional activity of the modernist writer, seeking to make new sense through situated engagements with, and departures from, precursors. Hence it is natural that Cavell would devote so much time and

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energy to the study of literary texts, where efforts to find and make sense are foregrounded over proofs and fixed results. And given his philosophical attention to questions of method (in literary study as well as elsewhere), it is also unsurprising that Cavell has often written about conceptual issues of interest to literary theorists, such as meaning, interpretation, metaphor, genre, and so on. Arguably no other living philosopher has done as much as Cavell to show the common cause shared by literature and philosophy, where both only stand to lose by failing to acknowledge and embrace the claims of the other.

It would seem, therefore, that literary critics, in particular, would have much to gain by engaging seriously with Cavell's work. Yet widespread admiration for Cavell by literary critics has only infrequently resulted in anything discernable as real intellectual influence. Indeed, the ambivalent reception of Cavell in literary studies (an odd mixture of admiration and apathy, which seems to treat him as worthy of praise yet somehow safe to ignore) is a vexing curiosity: obviously held in high esteem, he is rarely cited, and more rarely yet do his insights and ideas establish the terms of professional debate within literary studies about a given intellectual issue, whether theoretical or interpretive. Compared to the palpable influence upon literary studies of others of Cavell's philosophical contemporaries (Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, or now Levinas and Deleuze, to name only the most obvious) the extent to which Cavell has been overlooked, even avoided, by literary critics is striking indeed.

It is a methodological principle of Wittgenstein's (and thus Cavell's) therapeutic and conversational approach to philosophy that no philosophical account or therapy can be accepted as correct if the person to whom it is offered cannot recognize him- or herself in its terms. (Freudian psychoanalysis is also an important influence on Cavell's commitment to this thought.) Indeed, such recognition is criterial of an account's truth: for Wittgenstein and Cavell, there is no philosophical knowledge that is not first validated as self-knowledge, as new knowledge about one's own commitments, longings, wishes, needs, and fantasies, where that knowledge is found at least good enough by (some) others and by oneself over (some) time.

If we take Cavell's project seriously, no one can compel another (even by means of logic) to accept the truth of a particular philosophical account, such as about the privacy (or publicity, for that matter) of mental states: each participant in the philosophical conversation must recognize and authenticate the truth of a particular account for herself. Since philosophical accounts or accountings aim at (new) self-knowledge, the demand to arrive at recognition and authentication

puts pressure on the subject and its commitments as they stand. This pressure is likely to prove, at various times, off-putting, outrageous, entrancing, and risky. There is, moreover, no fixed, rule-circumscribed method for relieving this pressure, nor any possibility of getting free of it once and for all.

In the absence of freely given agreement, then, there is no alternative to further philosophical conversation. It follows, therefore, that if most literary critics have to date been unable to recognize themselves and their professional concerns in Cavell's work, then this cannot (in good faith) simply be blamed on them (say, for not being able to grasp its logical truth). The true student of Cavell or Wittgenstein can, in the face of such disagreement or indifference, do nothing other than attempt once again—with as much grace, tact, and sympathy as possible—to continue and deepen the critical conversation, acknowledging the misunderstandings and sincere differences of opinion that have brought that conversation, in the past, to the awkward silence that, in most quarters, characterizes its present condition.

We believe that there can be no reframing of Cavell that will make him newly interesting to literary scholars in the present that is not, at the same time, a therapeutic uncovering of the resistances that have led to the repression of his voice and work in the past. The two tasks—taking up the critical past so as to engage productively with interests and work that lie, so far, aslant Cavell's, and reanimating his work for the future—must go hand in hand. What, then, might be the nature of the intellectual resistance that has led literary critics, as it were, to avoid Cavell? Why might Cavell's voice and thought have failed to influence the literary critical community? Addressing these questions is a principal task and accomplishment of the essays that follow, and we cannot nor would we wish to preempt their detailed work. But it may nonetheless be helpful to have on hand our articulation of some very general suspicions about sources of resistance to Cavell within great stretches of literary studies, suspicions that we initially articulated in this way to our contributors, as we invited them then to go further.

We begin with the observation that ordinary language philosophy (so crucial to Cavell's work) is often, in its appeals to "what we say when," taken to be a form of "commons-room" authoritarianism that is both class-biased and inattentive to the varieties of demotic speech. This widely held view has certainly been one stumbling block to the general acceptance of ordinary language procedures in literary studies. In our view, however, this understanding of ordinary language philosophy is badly mistaken. There is, to be sure, a normativity to ordinary language: Cavell has always emphasized the "simultaneous tolerance and

intolerance of words" (CR 186) and has made clear that words cannot be given just any meaning or reach. But the normativity of ordinary language appeals to "what we say" is not ideological in nature, arbitrarily invoking some imagined community's customs as a fixed standard (as a skeptical cultural studies critic might think). Nor do such appeals work by invoking a set system or framework of linguistic rules (as more traditionally minded analytic philosophers might believe). Instead, for Cavell, the appeal to ordinary language is entered precisely when the very existence of any "we" is in doubt, and claims to "what we say" are by their very nature vulnerable, naked, and exposed (subject to rebuke, indifference, or any other number of ways such claims might misfire). Therefore, appeals to ordinary language work, when they work at all, by effecting a liberating transformation—a sense of arrival at felt rightness—in the ear both of the one entering the claim and the ear of anyone who follows its rightness. When this happens, a new or transformed "we" is composed or revealed, consisting of new or transformed subjects, who have entered into this new we from the resources of their own subjectivities. This is as much true of the one entering the claim to what we say, from within a situation of crisis, as of the ones, if any, who respond. Consolidation of one's subjectivity in possession of an articulated sense of what we say is a new achievement for any human subject, and the pursuit of this begins in doubt and remains fraught with risk. We think this is an important (and hardly conservative) image of what a "we" can be, with profound implications not only for aesthetics but for ethics and political theory as well.

Having addressed the stumbling block of misconceptions about "ordinary language," however, we are now ready to suggest another—and perhaps even deeper—reason that literary studies has found so little use for Cavell's ideas: his humanism. The literary critic Garrett Stewart has, in fact, suggested that it is precisely Cavell's affirmation of the concept of "the human" that has put him at odds with so much literary theory which, at the very historical moment Cavell was emerging on the philosophical scene, believed it was putting "the human" behind it, to be discarded in the dustbin of the metaphysical past, in favor of more objective and less human-subject-centered study of the linguistic and material-cultural conditions of the production and reception of texts. The concept of the human is quite obviously at the very heart of Cavell's project, and its fundamental importance is evident in Cavell's reliance on, and frequent invocation of, a series of related concepts that, in our current critical environment, must seem woefully outdated to many: in particular, concepts like "voice," "self," and "subject." Cavell employs these terms freely, and without irony; in fact he declared in *The Claim of*

Reason that he practiced ordinary language philosophy in order “to reclaim the human self from its denial and neglect by modern philosophy” (CR 154). Sentiments and intellectual commitments like these, we suggest, have a great deal to do with why (however much Cavell’s creativity, style, and specific critical insights may occasionally be admired by literary critics) his work has resisted ready assimilation to literary criticism under a dominant anti- or post-humanist dispensation.

We believe Stewart has identified something very important here, and indeed recent literary theoretical work that engages with Cavell confirms Stewart’s suggestion about the importance of the idea of “the human” to the allergic reaction literary theory has had to Cavell. Consider, for instance, the recently published volume, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (Columbia 2008), which collects an essay by Cora Diamond on J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, along with responses to Diamond by Cavell, John McDowell, and Ian Hacking, all introduced by the deconstructive literary critic Cary Wolfe. In his introduction, Wolfe argues that the “fundamental difference” between Derrida and thinkers like Cavell (and Diamond) is that the latter hold on (nostalgically, mistakenly) to the importance of the concept of “the human” for philosophical (especially moral) thought, while Derrida, on the other hand, has shown us how to overcome that outmoded metaphysical category. Reading Wolfe’s stimulating and provocative introduction, we could not help but recall Cavell’s oft-repeated point that there is in fact nothing more human than the desire to transcend the human (to become, even, somehow inhuman or post-human). Far from actually succeeding in leaving behind (by deconstructing) the category of the human, we believe that poststructuralist antihumanism is itself but another (very sophisticated) expression of one of the deepest and most characteristic of human impulses—the wish humans have always had to transcend their own finitude. This is obviously a contentious claim, one which needs to be handled with care, and this is certainly not the place to settle responsibly such a complex and consequential issue. All we wish to suggest is the centrality of the concept of the human both to Cavell’s project and to literary theoretical resistance to it. Therefore, any attempt to make Cavell speak to contemporary literary studies must directly address (indeed defend) his interest in, and allegiance to, the human (the human voice, the human self). If, as we believe, theoretical antihumanism (or more recently, posthumanism) is indeed one of the key reasons Cavell’s work continues to suffer from a strange aura of untimeliness—of a curious “lack of fit” with contemporary critical concerns—then a fresh consideration of the Cavellian understanding of the human must play a central role in any reframing of that work for a literary critical audience.

When Cavell wrote that he hoped to reclaim the human self from its neglect by modern thought, he was, in fact, not simply summarizing one goal of *The Claim of Reason* alone, but succinctly characterizing the ambit of his entire intellectual career. What it means to be a human being, to lead a (truly) human life, is exactly what Cavell has always been asking after. That he finds it necessary to continue to ask should immediately suggest how complex and sophisticated is his (still unfolding) account, and it should give us pause before we too quickly identify Cavell's vision of humanity with the metaphysical "universal human substance" that is generally the target of suspicious antihumanists. Indeed, for Cavell, there is nothing more uncanny than the human, just as there is, in a way, nothing more extraordinary than the ordinary. Or as Cavell himself put it in characterizing the sense of the uncanniness of the ordinary—and of the human—that lies at the heart of his work: "I might describe my philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic" (IQO 154).

Human beings are then always (at least potentially) haunted by experiences of the strangeness of themselves to themselves and to others: human selfhood is a fragile achievement to be sought (to be claimed and then re-claimed) and never simply some stable psychic state or metaphysical substance to be complacently stood upon. Indeed, one can be summoned or called, surprisingly, by things, events, and persons that one does not anticipate or expect, to a sense of one's non-self-presentness, one's radical otherness to oneself, and then (sometimes, but then again sometimes not) to a further sense of reintegration of the self in the recovery or establishment of one's human voice. These claims apply equally to a human community's possibilities of a sense of strangeness to itself and of reconsolidation. Both ordinary language philosophy as Cavell sees it and Cavellian reading (of writers like Emerson and Thoreau) track what might be called *essentially finite* pursuits of selfhood and community under conditions of uncanny loss and fallenness. To attempt in these conditions to stand on what is said, where that is taken to be fixed as a matter of linguistic or social fact, is to follow Torvald in *A Doll's House* in taking himself to be "above reproach" and thus to refuse the passionate utterance of another from within a moment of crisis. To attempt to control the terms of judgment absolutely, say by insisting on proofs one can hold within one's own consciousness apart from any conversation, is to follow Othello in his desperate impulse toward intactness. Nothing is more human than such efforts. But they are efforts of situated, finite selves, driven by anxieties and wishes they have taken on via their particular routes of fragile entry into language

and human community. Cavellian ordinary language philosophy and Cavellian criticism undertake to describe, understand, assess, enact, and improve upon such finite pursuits of selfhood and community from within a sense of shared situations and complexities of impulse, rather than from a self-certain and all-knowing place apart, from which the human could be taken as already specified, factually or ideally. Such, at least, is our sense of the complexity and dynamism of Cavell's multilayered account of the human, and we think the reclamation of the human self against its neglect by modern thought is as necessary and urgent today as it was when Cavell first began his long career.

Roughly thirty pages from the end of *The Claim of Reason*, there is a section entitled, somewhat cryptically, "proving the existence of the human" (CR 465–68). Prior to that, the bulk of Parts I, II, and III of *The Claim of Reason* is devoted to close analysis of the roles of criteria and of claims about criteria in philosophy and in human life. Some principal results that emerge are that criteria function as standards for reasonable judgment and that claims about what our criteria are are properly entered when those criteria have somehow fallen into doubt (perhaps someone is ignoring them), so that we need, or someone needs, reminding of them. When it comes, however, to criteria for knowledge of the presence of a generic object—that is, an ordinary object of common experience such as a tomato or an envelope or a human hand; cases in which there could be no issue of distinguishing a specially tricky or difficult object (say, a pi-meson trace in a cloud chamber) from others, where expertise may be required—then the *only* thing that a request to know one's criteria for saying "I know" *could* mean is that the very existence before one of the generic object, and so of the world as a whole, is somehow called into question. Once it has been thus called into question, then there is no way back to establishing contact with, let alone intimacy with, objects in the world in general via contact with something else (sense-data, ideas, impressions). Appeals to what our criteria are are impotent to establish the existence of generic objects. The skeptic already knows everything there is to know about when we *ordinarily* say "I know" (that there's cheese in the cupboard or a goldfinch in the garden), and for him that is not enough. The criteria for ordinary knowing have lost their grip on him, and no reminder of the availability of criteria in ordinary cases, for good enough practical purposes, will help. Hence, Cavell asks, "Shall we say that we have *faith* that the things of our world exist? But how is that faith achieved, how expressed, how maintained, how deepened, how lost?" (CR 243).

The theme that thus arises of faithfulness vs. faithlessness, or of intimacy vs. alienation with the things and persons of a world, is then

woven through detailed accounts of language-learning and the formation of the human subject as a subject capable of judgment and of moral conversation. There is, we think, little if anything in the philosophical literature that is better than these pages—that is more perceptive, intimately accurate, or phenomenologically acute in tracing the formation and vicissitudes of lives of human subjects who have emerged, somehow, without absolute ground in cognitive contact with an absolute given, into a world of socially existent, contested, and sometimes resolvable, but sometimes irreparably divided, judgment-making. What it is to judge anything at all to be thus and so, exactly how others are present, always, within the practices of judgment and moral conversation (as, among other things, introjected images of power or cold provokers of anxiety), but also how withdrawal and alienation from these practices can be possible and deeply tempting—all this is as good as it gets.

But there is also some danger that all of Parts I and II will be read, first, as intended to be foundational for the somewhat freer Part III, about morality, and Part IV about “the problem of others.” After all, Parts I and II are about the concepts and phenomena of knowledge and judgment, and surely (it will be thought) the task of the philosopher, and a task Cavell seems to be undertaking, is to get those concepts and phenomena *right*, before turning to the consequences of correct vs. incorrect understandings of these concepts and phenomena for other regions of human life. And, second, once so read, there is a danger that the enterprise will be assessed as a failure in being, let us say, too phenomenological-descriptive and not systematic-theoretical enough. If we want to know what knowledge and judgment really are, would we not do much better (it may be argued) to look to empirical cognitive psychology or, more recently, to talk of neural connections, MRI images, and brain regions, or perhaps to evolutionary psychology and biology? These styles of inquiry have, after all, begun even to invade literary studies. And the reason for this assessment is all too natural. If we want to know what knowing and judging are, shouldn't we turn to a systematic, scientific account of what the evolved, biological-material, human organism is, at bottom, doing? Or, in a different idiom, why not pay attention to the social-material conditioning of human subjects, along the lines of Althusserian interpellation? Why not a material politics instead of and beneath descriptive-critical phenomenology?

In contrast, Cavell's remarks about moments of hesitation, imitation, and intimacy felt and then ruptured within the scene of language-learning, and within the formation and continuing life of a human subject of judgment, can seem merely phenomenological, too surfacy. Sure, that's

the way it looks to him, as a casual, non-scientific and not immediately political outsider, but why should we trust his impressions? Why should we worry so much about a liability or tendency to skeptical anxieties taken as “a natural expression of a creature complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all” (CR 140)? One way or another, let’s get serious about what’s really going on.

It is against this background of worry that it is particularly useful to turn to the section “proving the existence of the human.” Here in particular we can see a *history* of the phenomena of knowing and judging, a history that situates and deepens the earlier phenomenology, just as the phenomenology informs the history. The resulting combination of phenomenology and history into a philosophical anthropology should be read as a unified whole, and it should be understood as a *reading* of our history, a claim—tentative, defeasible, and yet potentially illuminating—about central *topoi* of that history and about how human nature is made manifest within it, both variously and recognizably.

So how does the history go? And what could a history of phenomena of knowing and judging have to do with the topic of proving the existence of the human? The topic itself is initially unclear. Surely I am a human being in virtue of my biological constitution, a fact that needs no proof, let alone one by me. So what is the task at issue, and how does it have a history?

Descartes and Rousseau are crucial figures. Cavell cites with approval Anthony Kenny’s observation that “Descartes’s innovation in the philosophy of mind” is “the substitution of privacy for rationality as the mark of the mental” (CR 470). But we already know three things from the earlier remarks on criteria about Cavell’s views about the nature of this achievement:

- (1) it cannot consist in the discovery that judgment begins in a private encounter with a purely internal mental object of judgment, for judgment as an activity begins only in and through initiation by others into the life of language;
- (2) instead, a sense of one’s essential privacy is an expression of alienation from common life; and
- (3) there is no simple, straightforward route back from alienation to reintegration with the ordinary.

Because, we conjecture, of the development of increasingly specialized and skill-based modern labor, human beings in growing up must now pass through longer periods of training, including internal reflection on how complex tasks are best done in varying circumstances. Because,

further, of the development of market economies, social stations are less fixed than they once were, and it is less clear what is wanted or expected of anyone entering into grown-up life. The development of suitable skills and of broader modes of public comportment within a diverse society, for the sakes of both a wage and recognition as an accomplished grown-up, is now in principle open to everyone (even if for many still blocked in fact), but exactly how to take up this possibility is less specified than it was in a culture of direct apprenticeship within the way of life of one's parents and clan. Descartes' initial sense of privacy expresses this sense of a power to develop worthwhile skills coupled with uncertainty about how to do so in detail, in ways that may generally be ratified by others.

This sense of privacy is then even more marked in Rousseau. Rousseau's sense of privacy verges on the paranoid, but also records a common-enough sense among modern human subjects. As Cavell describes it, Rousseau

has the sense [first] that he has become unknowable—private—because to know him would be to know the sentiments of his heart—in particular, his pity for others and his fears of them—and the sentiments of his heart have become unintelligible to (inexpressible by) other human beings (as a result of what they perceive as human progress); second, that our social bonds are not the realization but the betrayal of the social contract, in a word conspiracies, so that there is among us no public thing at all.

(CR 469)

As though literalizing and hyperbolizing Descartes' sense of privacy as alienation, it is for Rousseau as if others were zombies and he were mad. Caught up in their routines of exercising skills and responding to the demands of others, but without any expressions of interest, feeling, and commitment in relation to their activities that are legible to him, Rousseau finds himself cast upon himself, "maddened through an isolation" (CR 469), as Cavell puts it. Perhaps many or most of us, much of the time, are lucky enough not to feel this sense of isolation. Work and family and participation in public institutions may be good enough. But then for some—perhaps for many, at least sometimes—perhaps not.

And then, for Cavell, following Rousseau, one is first of all thrown back upon oneself. "To possess my existence" (as a being capable of feeling, interest, animation, and commitment) "I must declare it" (CR 462). Rather than denying one's condition in coldness, dullness, or a reversion to routine that foregoes hope, one must face "the

apprehension that human subjectivity, the concept of human selfhood, is threatened, that it must be found and may be lost; that if one's existence is to be proven it can be proven only from oneself" (CR 465).

But here simple assertion of one's own interest as idiosyncratically one's own will not do either. I might declare my interest in playing fifteenth century viola da gamba music or in the history of cricket or, say, in philosophy. But if no or very few others find sense and worth in what I then declare and do, then recognition will not be forthcoming, and the sense of moving as a ghost through a world of zombies will not cease. Instead, my declaration and enactment of my interests may and must be in "faithfulness to [the] desire [for] union or reunion, call it community" (CR 463). Somehow, the task of "the acknowledgment of the existence of finite others" (CR 463), with passions and interests different from one's own, must be managed, but in such a way that some form of mutual sense is achieved and enacted, so that we are, or are no longer, for one another mere satellites around one another's isolated egos or mere objects of instrumental use.

The good news is that Cavell holds out and declares hope that this can still be done, even if the work of acknowledgment and of the enactment of interest is also never finished, but remains always to be redone. Drawing always on both ordinary language philosophy in its declaration and discovery of what we really want to say, and also on the criticism of modern works of art that aims at declaring what we feel in an encounter with the difficult and new, Cavell turns to literary texts and films—to Shakespeare, Coleridge, Thoreau, Hawks, and Capra, among many others—in order to track declarations and denials of interest, skeins of acknowledgment and avoidance. This mode of attention to the literary or filmic text is different from focusing on texts in a detached, positivistic spirit as mere shapes of black ink on white pages, and it is different, too, from focusing on ink-on-pages as produced and consumed by impersonal social forces or movements of power. Those ways of proceeding have their points: deconstruction in directing our attentions to textual ambiguities and ambivalences, to failures of control of the text by a single-presiding, self-present voice; various forms of New Historicism or Cultural Studies in directing our attention to the situation of the production and reception of texts within contested social and political life. There are insights to be won here, and Cavell does not deny them. Yet woven throughout and legible within both textual indeterminacies and plays of social contestation there remains too, for Cavell, an agon of human subjectivity, poised between acknowledgment and avoidance, and seeking further and fuller accounts and enactments of interest. Hence Cavell's criticism is all at once characterological

(oriented toward texts and lines within texts as voiced by a subject), allegorical (in finding, always, partial successes and failures of contextual enactments of interest), deconstructionist (in seeing language and culture as always inherited and to be inherited, in ways that outrun full control), and political (in seeing agons of the human played out in specific sociopolitical settings). The range, complexity, and intimacy of the form of attention that inhabits Cavell's criticism are, in short, remarkable.

The epigraph to Part I of *The Claim of Reason* is a line from Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*: "This philosophy does not rest on an Understanding *per se*, on an absolute, nameless understanding, belonging one knows not to whom, but on the understanding of man;—though not, I grant, on that of man enervated by speculation and dogma;—and it speaks the language of men, not an empty, unknown tongue" (cited CR 1). This implies that we can ask about any piece of this philosophy—or criticism or literature or film, in their affinities to philosophy—: who is speaking or writing, here and now, in light of what occasions, and more specifically in light of exactly what kind of prompted alienation, what kind of occasioned failure of joint sense-making? And it implies, second, that *philosophy* (or literature or criticism) can still be written or spoken, that is, that what is then said or written need not be, always, merely personal or idiosyncratic, though that is always a risk when mutual isolation and alienation are the points of departure. It is possible that what reveal themselves as *our* interests in *our* lives will be declared, revealed, and enacted, that *our* sense, including our differing contributions to it, will be found and made. A claim of reason—a claim about what we do or say, made in the interest of self-knowledge, community, and the life of reason—can be entered and can, sometimes, be redeemed. Acknowledgment, an active responsiveness to others, can overcome avoidance; expressiveness can overcome dullness and repression. But either way, we are fated to move in the space between acknowledgment and avoidance (see CR 451), bereft of absolute solutions, but with—at least it may be hoped—some possibilities of mutual, sense-making life, woven through continuing difference. One might hope to come productively, at least for a time, to "confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me" (CR 125).

Without fixed ground, without assurance of success, this is, Cavell argues, a task and a possibility that is allotted simultaneously to philosophy, literature, and critical study. Whatever their relative differences from one another—philosophy's turns to abstraction and impersonality, literature's emphases on figuration and particular emplotment, and criticism's mediating engagements involving all of theory, close reading,

history, and comparison—this is an image that can be, and in Cavell's hands has been, immensely fruitful for understanding both human life and some central literary texts of that life. In the spirit of this thought, we hope for, urge, and prophetically expect a creative, open, renewed critical reception of Cavell within contemporary literary studies, in a way that accepts, but also deepens, literary studies' current self-understandings and critical achievements. But of course only time will tell.

One major consequence of Cavell's interest in the human subject in language and culture and of his ways of doing both criticism and philosophy is that there is rarely a sharp division between theoretical reflection and critical reading. Nor is any such sharp division evident among the essays that compose this volume. Nonetheless it seemed helpful enough to divide the essays provisionally into those that are concerned primarily with canonical philosophical texts (Kant and Wittgenstein in particular) and with questions of aesthetic and critical theory and those that are concerned primarily with developing (and of course commenting on) practices of reading. We mention here the presence of this rough organizational division that we have introduced in order to remind readers not to take it too seriously.

We are happy to conclude these introductory remarks by adding that it has been a continuous pleasure for us to work with our contributors to this volume. Not all editors of collections are in a position to say what we are able to say wholeheartedly: that our contributors produced their essays on time and were always graciously and imaginatively responsive to comments and suggestions from us. We have the greatest confidence in their powers and insights, both in general and as they are embodied in these essays, and we are grateful to them for their work.