

## A soteriology of reading: Cavell's excerpts from memory

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I can see that my clinical issues may have enabled a couple of critical insights here. But what does it take for the critical to inspire the clinical?

Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*

The difficulty in understanding Stanley Cavell's relation to literary criticism is felt, typically if not most acutely, not so much by those trained in philosophy as by those trained in literary criticism. This undoubtedly is a by-product of the fact that most philosophers trained in the tradition in which Cavell himself was trained are, by and large, happy to ignore his writings in and about criticism. Still, it is not surprising that those trained in literary criticism can find his critical writings perplexing. There is, after all, an intimate overlapping and criss-crossing between Cavell's writing about J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein and scepticism and acknowledgement, on the one hand, and his subsequent (and often, his immediately succeeding) writing about Shakespeare and film and opera, on the other hand. Absent serious and sustained engagement with that philosophical writing and the philosophical texts that provoke it, you will find that sizeable regions of Cavell's thought are simply opaque to you.

One might imagine that the best advice to give such readers of Cavell's writings in and about criticism is, simply: read more philosophy. But beyond its unhelpfulness (because it says the obvious), that advice runs the danger of encouraging the same error that it wants to locate in others, of separating Cavell the philosopher from Cavell the literary (and film and opera) critic and theorist. Beginning with his first essays, however, Cavell himself has described the work of literary criticism and of philosophy in ways that show them to be profoundly revealing of one another. More recently, Cavell has been drawn to the parallel between the demands of philosophy as he conceives it – illustrated

in the methods of the later Wittgenstein and of ordinary language philosophy – and the demands of autobiography. If the former parallel (between philosophy and literary criticism) shows itself in operation to be part of a sketch of a theory of criticism – what Cavell has chosen to call 'a theology of reading' (TOS 53) – so, too, his recent efforts at philosophy-as-autobiography are concerned with the point of reading no less than with the practice of writing, and they express Cavell's interest in a soteriological or redemptive understanding of reading.

In what follows I will want to bring out the intimacy between Cavell's practice of philosophy and his remarks on literary criticism by considering two pairs of sentences from Cavell's essay 'The Politics of Interpretation', first published (under the title 'Philosophy as Opposed to What?') in 1982. I will then work my way from some pertinent descriptions in Cavell's semi-autobiographical 'Philosophy and the Arrogation of Voice' (the first chapter of *A Pitch of Philosophy* from 1994) to the fragment of Cavell's autobiography published in 2006 as 'Excerpts from Memory' (republished, though not without some minor textual variations, as the opening chapter of *Little Did I Know*). My aim in reading these three texts together is to make explicit an argument I find in them for the redemptive structure of the work of reading, an argument that moves through these texts from theory to practice, culminating in the latter text's climactic retold memory that Cavell labels his 'revelation of paternal hatred' (EM 779; LDK 16).

### Philosophy and criticism

The intimacy between Cavell's practice of philosophy and his remarks on literary criticism is found almost everywhere in the pages of his first collection of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, where the thought of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is revealed through the same attention to the impact or impression of their words that Cavell brings to his readings of Beckett and Shakespeare. An illuminating statement of this connection is given a dozen years later in Cavell's essay 'The Politics of Interpretation'. While there is much in this essay that bears on the topic of the present volume, I want to concentrate on two pairs of sentences from this essay as prelude to what I will say about 'Excerpts from Memory'.

The first pair of sentences appears somewhat buried in a footnote which they conclude: 'The underlying subject of what I take criticism to be is the subject of examples. I suppose it is the underlying subject of what I take philosophy as such to be' (TOS 47 n.10). As I read it, Cavell's claim is not merely that criticism deals with or trades in examples, that it takes specific works (of literature, painting, music, etc.) for its subject, but that its subject *is* examples.

That is, criticism practised rightly is inevitably concerned with the status of the examples it employs to alter our way of seeing or hearing, with what they have to teach us about *such* things, and especially with how anything ever should come to *serve as* an example, an example *of this* rather than of something else. What determines such a status? To appreciate how this question can be meant quite generally, consider the following brief series of wonders from Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*: 'What is the difference between regarding an object now as an individual, now as an example? One way of putting the problem about examples (and hence one problem of universals) is: How is the question "of what is this object (say what we call a shoe) an example?" to be answered? One wants to answer it by holding up the shoe and crying out, "Why, an example of this!" Would it help to hold up a different shoe? If you did, and someone then replies, "Now I see what it (the first shoe) is an example of," what would he have seen? (This seems to be what Berkeley's idea of a particular idea (or object) representing others of "the same sort" amounts to)' (CR 186).<sup>1</sup>

The context of Cavell's remark – it is, roughly put, an aesthetic context – suggests to me that the following distinction might direct the question about examples to fertile ground. The underlying interest in examples in literary criticism and in philosophy is not, curiously, an interest in what an example shares with whatever it is an example of; whereas that *does* seem to be our interest in examples when we are, say, choosing a carpet or a sofa fabric, or when we do natural science. That is, while in these activities we do speak of examples (or rather, of samples and of controlled experiments) as being of interest to us because of how they are like what they exemplify (an example as an instance or token), we also speak in aesthetic contexts of something being the 'right' or 'telling' or 'perfect' example, one which interests us because of its emblematic aptness or richness (example as exemplar).<sup>2</sup> While I do not say that this is an absolutely clean distinction, it seems right to say that when we are interested in something as instance or token we mostly are not interested in it as exemplar, and vice versa. Our interest in one eclipses our interest in the other, like two aspects of the same figure. What this means is that these two senses of 'example' are distinguished not by the classes of objects they pertain to but by the interest we happen to take in something. I can point to one and the same instance of 'clutch hitting' in baseball, for example, with an interest in teaching the use of the term to someone new to the game, but also in the course of explaining why just *this* hit at *this* late moment in *this* championship game produces such an explosion of admiration and disbelief and praise – why, thanks to that effect on us, it *epitomizes* clutch hitting. We can take an example that seems to sit at the crossroads of literature and philosophy: the early dialogues of Plato, in their proposing to find the definitions of piety or virtue or beauty, often can be read,

and perhaps are best read, as moving from some pitifully poor example or set of examples of the quality in question – offered by Socrates' interlocutor at the beginning of the dialogue – to what one might call the exemplary exemplification of that quality, and of its absence, in what Socrates and his interlocutors, respectively, inevitably show of themselves – that is, in the action of the dialogue. (Here the pertinence of the question about examples to autobiography, the topic of the second section below, should begin to show itself.)

To understand that philosophy could be concerned at bottom with examples is, in the mouth of Cavell, to understand the stunning accuracy, and the discerning ear, employed in the procedures of J. L. Austin and of ordinary language philosophy. While one can be impressed by the glorious mundaneness of Austin's proffered examples to illustrate 'what we say when' (for instance: when we knock things over at the dinner table; when we step on a snail; when we tie a string across a stairhead; when we feed the penguins peanuts<sup>3</sup>), their mundaneness does not imply that they function as mere instance or token for Austin, as they might, say, for Plato. (Here I have in mind those moments in the Platonic dialogues where Socrates introduces the activities of the farmer or physician or carpenter or athletic trainer in order to advance, or disguise, his line of questioning.) Something else, something difficult to see, is being asked of us when Austin reminds us that 'we may join the army or make a gift voluntarily, we may hiccough or make a small gesture involuntarily', but we cannot, ordinarily, join the army involuntarily or hiccough voluntarily.<sup>4</sup> What we are to do with any such example of our speaking life, proffered in the practice of ordinary language philosophy, is not to treat it as an instance of a kind, that is, to generalize it (as if all such examples point to the same moral: 'language is like *this*'), but to do something more like *perform* the example, or try it on. We are asked to imaginatively hear the words surrounded by our originary interest in them, by the form of life in which they are at home. In 'The Politics of Interpretation', Cavell characterizes ordinary language philosophy as 'the recovery of [the human] voice' (TOS 48). It is as if he were claiming that our coming to speak (again) depended on our knowing how to take the right interest in things – that is, roughly, on our knowing how to read examples as exemplary.<sup>5</sup> (This thought will be key to my reading of 'Excerpts from Memory' in the second and third sections below.)

I turn next to a second pair of sentences from 'The Politics of Interpretation', sentences from the stretch of argument culminating in Cavell's claim to be producing 'a theology of reading': 'It is not first of all the text that is subject to interpretation but we in the gaze or hearing of the text ... Access to the text is provided not by the mechanism of projection but by that of transference' (TOS 52). The aim of our reading, if we recognize ourselves as the text's

victim, or patient, is to be guided by the text, past the risks of its seduction, to our freedom from the person of the author. As Cavell explains when he returns to this thought some years later, 'that idea implies that the fantasy of a text's analyzing its reader is as much the guide of a certain ambition of reading – of philosophy as reading – as that of the reader's analyzing the text' (CT 113). To read a text in the former way – under the fantasy of the text analyzing me – is to find ways in which it shows me how to find myself beyond it, which is to say beyond myself as its reader.

While this emblem of reading as psychoanalytic transference is among Cavell's most memorable claims or discoveries, it is not his immediate counter-proposal to the views of Stanley Fish and Paul de Man, the particular exponents of the theory of reading as deconstruction whom Cavell addresses in 'The Politics of Interpretation'.<sup>6</sup> Prior to his arriving at this emblem borrowed from a central concept of Freud's teaching, Cavell detours through a specification of what he wants to claim is 'the underwriting of Austin and Wittgenstein by Emerson and Thoreau' (TOS 48) that culminates in his presenting a counter-emblem of reading (not as transference but) as salvation or redemption. Here are two observations made along the way of this detour. First, in discussing Emerson while drawing out his difference from de Man, Cavell writes: "There is always humanly a reason to postpone salvation. But it is part of Emerson's gesture to claim that his genius is redemptive beyond himself. The implication is that if you are not willing to make such claims for your work, do not call it philosophy' (TOS 50). And in the following paragraph, in discussing Thoreau, he says: 'At the moment I focus on Thoreau's way of saying that reading his book is redemptive. I take it for granted that the scene [described by this sentence from *Walden*: "You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns"] is one of interpretation, of reading and being read ... So the writer's silence (that is, this writer's writing) declares itself redemptive religiously, aesthetically, and politically' (TOS 51).<sup>7</sup>

If Cavell's most telling term of criticism of the theory of reading as deconstruction is that it distracts us from what truly requires justification in our philosophical discourse, and that thereby deconstruction shows by its distraction that 'there is always humanly a reason to postpone salvation', why does this language of redemption give way to the related, but differently entangled, language of psychoanalysis? Listen to how Cavell explains it: 'For most of us, I believe, the idea of redemption or redemptive reading and interpretation will not be credible apart from a plausible model or picture of how a text can be therapeutic, that is, apart from an idea of the redemptive as psychological, ... [and] I imagine that the credible psychological model of redemption will

have to be psychoanalytic in character' (TOS 51–2). It seems to me that Cavell's shift from the language of redemption to that of psychoanalysis is not completely willed here, as if something makes Cavell reluctant to give Freud pride of place.<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps I should say that the shift is made almost apologetically, as if guided by the thought that, however easy it is to misconstrue this employment of Freud's language in characterizing the aim of reading, it is *less* easily misconstrued than employing the language of redemption – the language of, say, Paul (and I don't mean Paul de Man).<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the reason for the ease of misconstruing the claim 'reading is to be understood psychoanalytically' is that most 'psychoanalytic' readings of texts (including some of Freud's own readings – for example, of Hoffman's 'The Sandman') take the text as the primary object of interpretation rather than the reader.<sup>10</sup> That this is not how the later Wittgenstein sees our relation to *his* difficult writing – that he describes his methods as offering (not solutions to problems but) treatments, 'like different therapies'<sup>11</sup> – is one of the principal points of contact between him and the American Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau. (Perhaps the best advice one can give in interpreting *Philosophical Investigations* is to bear in mind that Wittgenstein, as Cavell says, 'conceives of philosophy as a kind of reading' (TOS 52).)

To summarize this first section, I have emphasized and slightly amended the following two claims from 'The Politics of Interpretation': (1) the underlying subject of both criticism and philosophy is examples conceived as exemplars; (2) reading is to be understood redemptively, which one can construe to mean 'therapeutically' or 'psychoanalytically', as the reader's being read by the text. The philosophical text so conceived is meant to free us not only from our unexamined or dogmatic beliefs (a familiar task under the traditional conception of philosophy) but also from our unthinking ways of taking in what we read. Similarly, literary criticism so conceived should free us not only from the error of simply projecting ourselves onto the text (a bad theory of interpretation from most any theoretical standpoint) but also from the calamity of sacrificing our thinking to the text, to what Cavell calls its seductions. It is in characterizing this latter danger that Cavell alludes to Emerson's 'Divinity School Address', noting that the point of that address is 'to free us from our attachment to the person of the one who brings the message [call this Jesus], an attachment . . . of idolatry'. My aim here has been to reveal or flesh out how Cavell's signature claim from 'The Politics of Interpretation' – the claim that reading has the structure of transference – is framed, on one side, by a picture of reading as redemption and, on the other, by Cavell's summary assertion that 'what I am producing here . . . might be thought of as a theology of reading' (TOS 53).

### Philosophy and autobiography

If the goal of reading is freedom from the person of the author, how do we overcome the author whose story we pick up precisely because it is her or his story? That is, how can we be read by someone else's autobiography – in the instance we are about to take up, the autobiographical 'Excerpts from Memory' by Stanley Cavell? Does it help to observe that autobiography is a genre that from the beginning has been preoccupied with the question of the author's exemplarity – thinking of Augustine and, differently, of Rousseau – and so with the reader's relation to what is there to be emulated or imitated? It may help, but not enough: for even if Augustine's *Confessions* dramatizes the reader's potential for conversion through an act of reading – even if its knowledge of every prevarication and postponement I can employ or have employed against salvation somehow opens me to (what Augustine would call) God's grace – I may still be at a loss when faced with an autobiography by a more-or-less secular Jew of four score who claims the mantle of philosophy. And even if the methods of ordinary language philosophy are, as we have seen, concerned with exemplarity and so, as Cavell says, 'demand a systematic engagement with the autobiographical' (PP 6), we may still wonder what gaining our freedom from this ordinary language philosopher engaged with autobiography (this way) might look like (this time).

In order to address these questions, we must first add a further piece to the picture of Cavell's picture of reading, gleaned from the first chapter of his semi-autobiographical text *A Pitch of Philosophy*. One-third of the way through that chapter, where its recognizably autobiographical part begins, Cavell describes in brief but vivid detail his parents' contrasting influence on his image of or expectations for reading. Here I will consider explicitly only his mother's influence. The image of reading that he inherits from his mother pertains to 'her uncanny ability to sight-read' music – not her facility at it but her attitude while in the midst of it, an attitude Cavell comes to identify with the onset of migraine and with 'some kind of melancholy', but which he describes before that as 'precisely not ... a knack of interpretation, but something like the contrary, a capacity to put aside any interference, as of her own will, and to let the body be moved, unmechanically, by the mind of those racing notes' (PP 18). What I imagine Cavell to be noticing in thinking of reading on the model of sight-reading music, letting 'the body be moved, unmechanically, by the mind of those racing notes', is that the sight-reader's ongoing receptiveness to the passing notes is dependent on her ability to *imagine the sounds* of those notes. Without some such performative imagination, the body is fated to move mechanically.

'Imagine the sound' is the imperative characterizing virtually every instance of interpretation in Cavell's oeuvre, whether it concerns a work for the theatre, a film or a philosophical text. We need consider here only some obvious instances. In distinguishing Wittgenstein's methods from those of American pragmatism with which they might appear to overlap, Cavell observes that 'we must keep in mind how different their arguments sound, and admit that in philosophy it is the sound which makes all the difference' (MWM 36 n. 31). The flurry of questions that open the first section of Cavell's essay on *Endgame* concludes, 'What gives to [these characters'] conversation its sound, at once of madness and of plainness?' (MWM 117). Cavell's masterful reading of *King Lear* rests on his critical attention to the voice uttering the words 'and through that to the phenomenology of the straits of mind' that at each moment inform the characters' progress (MWM 269). Similarly, the weight Cavell gives to the words spoken in the films that he identifies as comedies of remarriage depends on his conviction that 'the words of dialogue put on the page ... have to be taken from the page and put back, in memory, onto the screen ... Apart from a clear recall, or a vivid imagination, of these words as spoken by these actors in these environments, my attention to the words may well seem, indeed ought to seem, misplaced or overdone' (PH 11). Perhaps it is not surprising in the case of dialogue from the theatre or film, just as in Austinian examples, that imaginatively hearing the words in their originating environment is described as something like hearing or being receptive to the sounds of the notes. But to see the extent to which Cavell relies on the act of imaginative hearing, compare this remark on reading Thoreau's writing, again from *A Pitch of Philosophy*: 'Writing appears in *Walden* not as an extension but as an experience of speech; ... it is not different in means or in medium [from speech] ... for reading with understanding requires reborn sensations, and first in hearing' (PP 41). But where and how can access to one's imaginative powers, to 'an equivalent of the enigmatic faculty of perfect pitch' (PP 21), be construed as an imperative for reading?

That such powers of imagination are called for by Cavell's 'Excerpts from Memory', and that satisfying these demands is required for reading this work as redemptive in Emerson's and Thoreau's sense as discussed above, is evident in two early passages, both from the first entry of 2 July 2003. ('Excerpts from Memory' unfolds as a series of dated entries, like a diary of remembrances.) In the first, Cavell explains his eschewing a chronological presentation or narrative for this attempt at autobiography because, as he says, 'such a narrative strikes me as leading fairly directly to death, without clearly enough implying the singularity of this life, in distinction from the singularity of all others, all headed in that direction.' Then comes the accurate and familiar term of

criticism: 'So the *sound* of such a narrative would I believe amount to *too little help*, to me or others' (EM 770; LDK 4, my italics). The second passage occurs even earlier and is, strictly speaking, Cavell's first act of memory in 'Excerpts from Memory', a text Cavell begins to write as he awaits an invasive medical procedure, the catheterization of his heart. Remembering 'a previous such period of awaiting surgery',<sup>12</sup> Cavell tells us: 'I discovered [then] that reading a book by Vladimir Jankélévitch on the music of Debussy ... effectively concentrated my attention, partly because of the beauty of the musical illustrations along with *the very effort* it required for my rusty musicianship *to imagine the sounds* of the illustrations unfamiliar to me that Jankélévitch includes in his text' (EM 768; LDK 2, my italics).

Here it helps to know that musical illustrations (typically, excerpts from a score), in contradistinction to (full) musical scores, do not necessarily require of readers 'the effort to imagine the sounds.' Depending on how they are used, they might require only that readers spot the similar motion in the notes, or read the quality of a chord, or check that a variant line is the retrograde of another, and so on. Musical illustrations, like any textual illustration, can be used for different purposes. For Cavell to tell us that the illustrations in Jankélévitch's text demand a greater responsibility, a greater imaginative responsiveness, is thus an important distinguishing feature of this text. The mention of the detail of imagining the sounds of Debussy's music from the score (a singularly difficult task in the case of Debussy as compared with, say, a score by Bach or Mozart or Beethoven) – together with the fact, dropped between the lines, that Cavell purchased Jankélévitch's text in preparation for writing his autobiography (or more specifically, for writing the third chapter of his semi-autobiographical text *A Pitch of Philosophy*) – thus prepares Cavell's reader for the kind of reading that will open up the text called 'Excerpts from Memory'.

The necessity of freeing one's powers of imagination is underscored immediately before that essay's climactic story, to which we are about to turn. Cavell relates and joins two events from his undergraduate days at Berkeley: his father's request, and his inability to meet the request, to write an acceptance speech for him (his father's written English was worse than his accented spoken English); and Cavell's signing up for an acting class that followed Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* in order to, as he puts it, 'explore this virtue of imagination.' As he considers the unusualness of this as preparation for a life in philosophy he notes that 'my philosophy teachers would not have accepted Stanislavskian exercises as bearing on the issues of what we were calling the problem of the existence of other minds. But then those teachers did not need me to write speeches for them' (EM 778; LDK 14). So Cavell's failure to find words for his father leads him to study Stanislavski on imagining how another feels. If the

demands of the text before us on our imaginative powers are not yet clear, then we are not imagining hard enough.

Cavell's autobiographical entry for 7 July 2003 begins, 'I believe I can date the moment at which I realized that my father hated me or, perhaps I can more accurately say, wished I did not exist' (EM 778; LDK 14–15). The scene of revelation is the following. Cavell (who is about to turn seven), his mother and his father have on this day moved from the house in Atlanta where he has lived with not only his parents but his grandmother and two beloved uncles (a house he calls for this reason 'paradise') to an apartment on the north side of Atlanta where the occupants will be just his parents and him. We are given his state of mind: 'Walking up the stairs to the top floor of the boxlike three-story brick apartment building . . . the catastrophe of the move broke over me in waves that I have periodically felt have never entirely stopped breaking' (EM 780; LDK 17). He enters the darkened front room, his mother in the room off to the right with some women friends, and notices, in particular and in this order, two things. The first is 'a purple glass bowl ... covered with a dome top of matching silver inset with purple glass panels.' He finds that the bowl contains 'small chocolate mint wafers whose tops were covered with tiny white dots of hard candy, a treat I loved to sample when these used to fill this container in anticipation of company coming to the old house.' The second object of Cavell's notice is his father, 'standing silently in the semidark at the other end of the sofa', with whom, Cavell tells us, he was rarely in a room alone.

Then in the last of several postponements in his relating the moment of his 'revelation of paternal hatred', Cavell reminds us one more time of the importance of sound and imagination in sight-reading (so to speak) the notes of this text, by relating in these words the game he would play as his parents drove into the driveway late at night after he had gone to bed, words that could stand for the task of his reader: 'I imagined them getting out of the car, my mother from the left since my father did not drive, then walking up the driveway and across the front porch into the house, *measuring my accuracy of imagination by how closely the distant sound of the opening of the front door coincided with my imagination of their having reached it*' (EM 781; LDK 18, my italics). Back in the new apartment with the glass bowl of wafers and Stanley's father, the story reaches its climax with these sentences: 'As I took one of the speckled wafers from the purple bowl, I said aimlessly, but somehow to break the silence with my father, "I didn't know we had these here." He lurched at me, wrenched the dome top and the wafer out of my hands, and said in a violent, growling whisper, "And you still don't know it!"' (EM 781–2; LDK 18).

The shock of this telling is surely in the father's lurch, in the words meant to hurt long before they can be appreciated for their irony in denying what is

evident to the senses, and not least in their being whispered, as if their violence is to be kept hidden from the women in the next room. Whether that is enough to call on my imagination of the scene – not only to picture it in my mind, say, but to take on its philosophical significance, and not to jump at the similarity, however shallow or deep, between the father's denial of the child's knowledge and the grown-up Cavell's unending interest in the problem of scepticism – I find that the shiny purple glass bowl with the speckled wafers has caught my attention.

The name for these speckled wafers, as for the speckles or sprinkles themselves, is, of course, 'nonpareils', and they are still a popular confection. Am I to believe that the Stanley Cavell writing in 2003 is unfamiliar with these wafers' proper name? Without deciding that I cannot believe this, even as I notice that Cavell makes a point of telling us that he looks up the term 'Mason jar' at a later uncertainty over kitchen vocabulary (*EM* 805; the observation is omitted from the text in *Little Did I Know*), I am content to note that the word he has settled on is not 'nonpareil' or 'disc' but 'wafer'.<sup>13</sup> The purple glass bowl with the dome top, meanwhile, is described as 'somewhat wider but less deep than a drinking tumbler'. Such a home for wafers in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, at least, is called a ciborium (or, if smaller, a pyx). The silver dome 'of matching silver inset with purple glass panels' might call to mind as well a church of the Eastern Orthodox faith, the sort of structure one finds in Cavell's father's native Poland.

But what would be Cavell's point in describing the scene with his father so as to allow this imaginative revisioning? The scene is, before all, a scene of deprivation that carries with it at some level for the reader the threat of castration. What is to be gained by recasting it as the child's offer – as the Jewish child Stanley's offer – of the Eucharist, what we also call communion? But then, what is to be gained by telling the story at all? It clearly costs Cavell dearly, even while its secret has cost him considerably more. Yet he has come to feel that 'its silence [is] blocking something irreplaceably valuable' (*EM* 779; *LDK* 16). But for whom? If the telling enacts some long-awaited catharsis, how are we invited to feel it, and how does our doing so invite philosophy?

### Redemptive reading

If, following Emerson and Thoreau, the autobiographical spirit informing Cavell's 'Excerpts from Memory' is redemptive, then what is redeemed in the telling of this scene of paternal hatred is, before all else, the episode itself. The episode began as an offer *in fact* of communion of sorts, in itself a small thing, from a son to his father with the crippled voice.<sup>14</sup> (Cavell's words 'I didn't know

we had these here' are spoken 'aimlessly, but somehow to break the silence with my father' (*EM* 781; *LDK* 18).) That the boy was punished for this offer by the father's refusal of it is why, of course, it has singed the outer skin of his memory, altering his sensation of what else not. We may find ourselves wondering not so much what has made Stanley Cavell the philosophical spirit he is, but what saved this boy and allowed him to become Stanley Cavell.

But there is more to the episode than its merely autobiographical (that is, its Cavell-specific) interest. By offering his gesture and words as the ritual of the Eucharist, Cavell has cast them in the place of *the* most representative of representative acts (the giving of the body's self in words, or the projection of the self's body into language): an excerpt from memory as exemplar. But that is to say, there is philosophical work for the reader to do here. Here are some work sites: how is it possible to redeem what I experience as an irredeemable act? How do sons grow up to understand their fathers sympathetically rather than self-justifiably? What must a father give up to accept a son's offer of comfort? And how could that sacrifice seem impossible to make? If these questions are asked with their full weight, not only might we come to see how *this* child prepares himself for the understanding of questions that populate Cavell's essays and books, but we might find ourselves guided to a renewed consideration of the representativeness of our own experiences.

Here is where an exemplary moment in our reading offers a path to freedom from the author through the possibility of redeeming the moment.

The risk we run of being taken in by what we read, diverted from our orbit by the gravitational pull of the text, is present in spades in the autobiographical text. What might it take to notice that the attractions of the genre reside not only in the author's reflections on events and acquaintances in his life but in the remarkably mundane details of that life, including, and perhaps especially, his life before he became an author, became who he is? Even in its most illustrious, because most self-deprecating, instances – the *Confessions* of Augustine and the *Confessions* of Rousseau – we are, as it were, set up to be struck by the *distinctive* banality of the protagonist's actions and transgressions. In the present instance, a time and a place that I could not have fancied as containing more than the merest possibility of romance – the Eastern European Jewish quarter of 1930s Atlanta, Georgia, USA – is revealed in Cavell's narrative to be a time and a place where the most life-altering memories were born. And that this discovery is no illusion, not merely the result of a literary conceit, is confirmed, of course, by the quality of the self-reflective or world-important thoughts in Cavell's autobiography, in his philosophical writings and so on – by whatever prompts one to take up his story, whatever one imagines Stanley Cavell to have become.

Some such dynamic is what leads to the impression (which I simply assert on its behalf) that autobiography craves idolatry. And the author who wants to prevent such conquests knows – if he has any experience at all of being drawn by a text – that he cannot simply tell the reader to go her own way now, any more than a therapist can acknowledge a patient's transference for her. As Cavell writes in the foreword to his first book, 'the great teacher invariably claims not to want followers, that is, imitators. His problem is that he is never more seductive than at those moments of rejection' (*MWM* xxxix).

It is in this light that I imagine we are asked to see Cavell's gesture of the proffered wafer. Incorporating that simple and familiar emblem of redemption, the gesture helps to dissolve the threat of idolatry by returning us to our individual work sites – that is, if we take Cavell's advice and make the effort (with 'reborn sensations, and first in hearing') to 'imagine the sounds' of these words in their full resonance at the time of our reading them. For when we do, we have the opportunity to notice that the drama of the moment is not just that between the child Stanley and his father. There is, evidently or manifestly, also the drama between the adult Stanley, writing these words, and his blocked, singed memory of that first drama, the pain of which explains the text's enactment of his delays and postponements in telling it. (To miss this piece of the drama is to miss nothing less than what it takes to transform such memories into words; not a small thing.) Similarly, just as there is the gesture of communion (anyway, an offer of conversation) made from the child Stanley to his father, so there is the adult Stanley's gesture of writing that figure of communion into his text, the consequences of which it is up to the reader to accept or refuse, a gesture to receive or deny. If the gesture is read as an emblem of redemption, then to receive the gesture is not quite to find oneself, or one's reading, redeemed. (The author is neither our father nor a Father, neither the Son nor his representative.) To receive this author's offer of an emblem of redemption is, in the therapeutic reversal of one's reading, to be moved to redeem it.<sup>15</sup> You may do this, for example, by finding yourself returned to excerpts of memories of your father, the one who in a sense cannot be known to you but who, in a critical sense, is known to you alone, the father of your vivid and dull and joyful and searing memories, particular memories waiting for their particular redemption in critical self-reflection – which is to say, philosophically – that you alone can give to them.

If that suggestion is an example (of which sort?) of an answer to the question, 'What, in your reading of Cavell, is to be redeemed?', then it also points the way to answering the question, 'And what if I don't redeem it?' If a theory of reading were to tell me what *must* happen in my engagement with a text, then I cannot imagine what I would do with it. And if a theory of reading knew what

I am to discover that the text before me knows about me, it still could not tell me. Redemption (of any sort) does not come so easily. It used to be that to redeem was to pay a ransom to get someone out of captivity.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays we might just swipe a card or read off some numbers over the phone. (And so for us redemption is merely a metaphor – if not something less, or worse.) Who is not familiar with such practices, and such theories, of reading?

Cavell's 'Excerpts from Memory', with its figure for the Christian figure of a literal offering of the self's body, exemplifies its author's understanding of the aim of reading – what I have called Cavell's soteriology of reading – as resting on the difficult, but not for that reason unpleasant, work of imaging a thing's proper sound. Where might this work lead? Perhaps, wherever else, to an answer to the perennial and critical question: is there salvation through works?<sup>17</sup>

### Notes

- 1 See also *CR* 205 for its discussion of the traditional philosopher's appeal to examples to illustrate or make 'a particular claim to knowledge'.
- 2 An important corollary to this distinction, if not this distinction itself, is noted in the following passage late in Part I of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: 'We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edn, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §531.)
- 3 See, for example, J. L. Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses' and 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd edn, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175–204, 272–87.
- 4 Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses', 191.
- 5 On the idea that learning to talk is conceptually connected to one's taking an interest in one's experience, see my 'Wanting to Say Something: Aspect-Blindness and Language', in William Day and Victor J. Krebs, eds., *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 204–24.
- 6 My interest in Cavell's critique of deconstruction is here limited to, and so exhausted by, its being the occasion for Cavell's articulation of his own view on the work of reading. For those interested in the particulars of Cavell's critique of deconstruction, see (naturally) 'The Politics of Interpretation', *TOS* 34–59, and *PP* 55–127. For a reasonably accurate secondary account, see Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 149–63.
- 7 Cavell's interest in the notion – even more than in the figure – of redemption begins at least as early as his early essays on Beckett and Kierkegaard and figures in his reading of works as disparate as Poe's 'The Black Cat' and the Hollywood remarriage comedy

- The Awful Truth*. Particular passages are too numerous and lengthy to include here, but compare 'Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*', *MWM* 133; *SW* 2 43–4 (where the problem of redemption is linked to, though not solved by, exemplarity); 'Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)', *IQO* 305, 316; and 'The Same and Different: *The Awful Truth*', *PH* 252 (where the idea of redemption realized through a performance – in this case, through Lucy's performance, as Jerry's sister, of 'My Dreams are Gone With the Wind' – is perhaps closest to the idea of a redemptive reading that I sketch in the third section of this chapter).
- 8 The language of (self-)redemption evidently prevailed in its interplay with the psychological when Cavell at an earlier date characterized Emerson's and Thoreau's writing: 'Kierkegaard wrote a book about our having lost the authority, hence so much as the possibility, of claiming to have received a revelation. If this means, as Kierkegaard sometimes seems to take it to mean, the end of Christianity, then if what is to succeed Christianity is a redemptive politics or a redemptive psychology, these will require a new burden of faith in the authority of one's everyday experience, one's experience of the everyday, of earth not of heaven (if you get the distinction). I understand this to be the burden undertaken in the writing of Emerson and of Thoreau ... One might take the new burden of one's experience to amount to the claim to be one's own apostle, to forerun oneself, to be capable of deliverances of oneself' (*PH* 240).
- 9 Readers of Wittgenstein might be reminded here of his writing in the foreword to *Philosophical Remarks*, 'I would like to say "This book is written to the glory of God", but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 7).
- 10 See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Writings on Art and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 193–233, esp. 201–9, and more particularly the footnotes on 206 and 207–8. I am not claiming that interpreting the text and interpreting the reader of the text are mutually exclusive (or that Freud is not sometimes engaged in both); compare *CT* 112–13.
- 11 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §133.
- 12 The linking of these two surgeries at the start of an autobiographical exercise suggests that we are being asked to imagine, or to try to imagine, a writing born from opening up or tearing open the body.
- 13 After reading a version of this chapter, with Stanley Cavell in the audience, at the conference in Edinburgh that was the originating occasion for the present volume, I asked Cavell the question that I here say I do not want to decide. He responded that, while writing 'Excerpts', (1) he *didn't* know that the confection he describes is called 'nonpareils', and (2) he did not *want* to know, did not want to look it up somehow: 'wafer' was the word he wanted. I took his response as encouragement for the interpretation that follows.
- 14 Cavell describes the father of his memory as having 'no ordinary language, his Russian and Polish fragmentary, his Hebrew primitive, his Yiddish frozen, his

- English broken from the beginning' (*PP* 21).
- 15 'The reversals of reading' is a guiding notion in the later stages of Tim Gould's study of Stanley Cavell's authorial voice and philosophical methods, and it bears comparison (but for another time) to the soteriological aspect under consideration here. See Timothy Gould, *Hearing Things: Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 16 I owe this observation to Kate Lufkin Day.
- 17 I am fortunate to be able to thank Bill Rothman, Tim Gould and Stanley Cavell for words of encouragement on a first draft of this paper, words that allowed me to return to it with harder questions but not without hope for better answers. I also wish to thank Richard Deming, Bernie Rhie, and Rob Flower for the generous time they gave over to reminding me what the harder questions were that needed asking.