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Skepticism and the Struggle over Finitude

Stanley Cavell

To show in detail how lyric poetry has the capacity to orient finite human subjects within the horizon of modern alienation, this chapter offers a fuller account of that finitude and responses to it as worked out by Stanley Cavell. Giving this account thus presents the most general form of the problems that poetry, in my reading, can address in unique and exemplary ways by linking language, finitude, and community. It is these problems that Hölderlin and Rilke pick up in their own historically and individually specific discourses, and that I track through their poetry as demonstrating the orienting capacities of lyric language. This chapter argues for skepticism as an appropriate point of entry into the general anthropological problems of finitude I read as paradigmatically treated by lyric poetry. I make this case by raising counterintuitions to Cavell and then developing his and my own responses to them.

Briefly put, philosophical skepticism is one particularly virulent form of a more general epistemic rationalism (often—unfairly—associated with the European Enlightenment). By the twenty-first century, this rationalism ramifies into a scientism that divides the world into an all-or-nothing of certain (rational) knowledge and total uncertainty or relativism. Cavell is certainly not the first to challenge dominant models of rationalism, or the first to do so by an appeal to

language,[1] just as Hölderlin and Rilke are hardly the only poets who seek links between mind and world in language. But Cavell *is* unique in combining an account of language's challenge to narrow rationalism (and all that challenge entails) with an account of the necessity (and necessary failure) of the yearning for certainty of which assorted rationalisms (epistemology, behaviorism, scientism[2]) are the most intellectually sanctioned expressions. Thus, although the drive for certainty is both impossible and (often) dangerous, that drive and its failure are essential to human subjectivity's mode of inhabiting its own constitutive finitude.

I present Cavell's discussions of skepticism, in its two paradigmatic forms of skepticism about other minds and skepticism about the (existence of) the external world, as the modern, secular appearances of the struggle against human finitude that poetic language seeks to inhabit.[3] I demonstrate that and why these

1. Indeed, much of Cavell's work is the writing of his own genealogy in this tradition: "Cavell cites less than two dozen authors over and again throughout his writing: those who for him constitute an alive part of the accepted British and American tradition—Plato, Descartes, Hume, Mill, Wittgenstein, and J. L. Austin; a major part of the Continental tradition—Kant, Hegel, Rousseau, Luther, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger . . . ; a claimed American tradition—Thoreau and Emerson; Blake and Wordsworth; Beckett, here by virtue of the long essay on *Endgame*; and Shakespeare, especially *King Lear* and *Othello*, tragedies which for Cavell play out essential features of the philosophical problems most on his mind. (The absence of women from this list is a measure of the failure of these traditions and an indicator of what we cannot rely on them for.)" Charles Bernstein, "Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein," *boundary 2* 9, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 297. In the German context, one might add Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Georg Hamann.

2. Scientism here is understood as "the belief that only knowledge obtained from scientific research is valid, and that notions or beliefs deriving from other sources, such as religion, should be discounted; extreme or excessive faith in science or scientists. Also: the view that the methodology used in the natural and physical sciences can be applied to other disciplines, such as philosophy and the social sciences" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, online ed., s.v. "scientism," http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/172696?redirectedFrom=scientism#eid). I hope the use of scient*ism* makes clear that I do not take any of my or Cavell's arguments for or against skepticism to be attacks on *science* as it is currently carried out and where practices of doubt and seeking certainty are and should be in place. (Although I would also reflect that the frustrations of lab work might deter scientists more than anyone from "excessive faith in science or scientists.")

3. The terms "modern" and "secular," of course, link Cavell to scholarly narratives of modernity as secularization, as the failure of cultural institutions to sustain conviction, and/or as entailing increasing doubt and contingency familiar from (although of course not identical in) Max Weber, Niklaus Luhmann, Charles Taylor, Reinhart Koselleck, and others. When I describe skepticism (both in the sense of professional skepticism and in the sense of radical contingency) as the modern, secular appearance of a fundamental anthropological habitus, I am not arguing for a particular beginning point or narrative of modernity defined by philosophy; indeed, as Cavell himself points out in his readings of Shakespeare, precisely the problems he identifies as those of skepticism appear earlier than their epistemological articulation: "Skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes" (Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 3). To this I would add that skeptical questioning is not always fully secular (as becomes evident in Hölderlin), and that because I contend that striving against finitude toward certainty is a fundamental anthropological behavior, prior to philosophical epistemology it will be found in other places, e.g., perhaps the problem of the discernment of spirits in religious visions or the topos of vanitas (the belonging of human subjects—or better, souls—to another world) or debates surrounding election/salvation.

questions cannot be answered or closed once and for all while showing how the view of language I use Cavell to develop in the chapter's final section offers new possibilities for reading lyric poetry and for understanding the lyric as an exit from the self-incurred constraints of the all-or-nothing of certainty and relativism.

Professional Skepticism and Human Finitude

Given that Cavell opens his most detailed considerations of skepticism (in *The Claim of Reason*[4]) by way of highly technical presentations of epistemological argumentation in Anglo-American philosophy, skepticism seems, on the face of it, too technical, too narrow, and too academic to be any kind of representation of a fundamental subjective habitus. Richard Rorty, in a review sympathetic to many of Cavell's aims, raises this question by way of Cavell's (in his view insufficiently explained) connection between "professional" skepticism and the "sense of the contingency of everything" that Cavell reads in Kant and romanticism (among other places).[5] Rorty agrees with Cavell on the centrality of Wittgenstein but would be perfectly happy to "leave Ayer and Price [the traditional epistemologists Cavell discusses in *The Claim of Reason*] in the care of Austin and Ryle [their challengers] and hasten on to the serious thinkers across the water," by whom he means Kant, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger.[6]

Because this stance has an innate plausibility (as Cavell puts it, how *can* the virulent problems of misunderstanding or misreading others be related to "that dreary discussion of invented surfaces of things and possible or impossible dreams or hallucinations that passes for philosophical investigation of our world"?[7]), it is worth looking at Rorty's alternative to see how a position that simply abandons skepticism and gets on with the business of coping with "the contingency of everything" works. Rorty shares with Cavell the view that philosophy as a cultural practice whose goal is the uncovering of natures or essences is doomed to failure, but, unlike Cavell, he therefore feels that philosophy of this sort should take its place alongside other cultural practices that subsequent cultural developments have rendered outdated or undesirable.[8] In a pragmatist acceptance of the "contingency of everything," he "defends the standard pragmatist claim that criteria for preferring some

4. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

5. Richard Rorty, "Cavell on Skepticism," in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16. (The essay was originally a review of *The Claim of Reason* published in *Review of Metaphysics* and was then reprinted in *Consequences of Pragmatism* in 1985.)

6. Rorty, "Cavell on Skepticism," 15.

7. Stanley Cavell, "Responses, " in Goodman, *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, 159.

8. See Richard Eldridge, "Philosophy and the Achievement of Community: Rorty, Cavell, and Criticism," *Metaphilosophy* 14, no. 2 (April 1983): 111–12.

practices to others can be found within, and only within, the history of culture."[9] On his account, abandoning the search for knowledge of essences leaves the level of cultural practices untouched—one can choose from among practices without much difficulty.

Again, this view is appealing, especially given that most of us most of the time do seem to choose between cultural practices while wearing the sense of our contingency lightly (this is what Rorty means when he says that if traditional philosophy is put in its place, relativism as a problem dissolves).[10] But Rorty's assumption that cultures simply develop better and better criteria for choosing cultural practices all the time ignores the "cases (surely there must be cases) in which later practices are not to be preferred to earlier ones,"[11] or situations in which cultural conflict "*cannot* be resolved simply by appealing to existing social practices," precisely because "the heart of the controversy is the genuine and serious conflict of competing social practices."[12] And in a second (related) problem for Rorty's view, he never asks why traditional philosophizing would arise in the first place, as, for example, in the case of skepticism, "how [traditional epistemology's] preoccupations could ever have seemed to express our fundamental concerns about our relation to the world and I and others in it, which . . . is to ask how modern skepticism (in Descartes and Hume and Kant) can (have) come to seem the fundamental question of philosophy."[13] The force of this question increases in light of responses to skepticism that

9. Ibid., 114.

10. "The reason relativism is talked about so much among traditional Platonic and Kantian philosophers is that they think being relativistic about philosophical theories—attempts to ground first-level theories—leads to being relativistic about the first-level theories themselves. If anyone really believed that the worth of a theory depends upon the worth of its philosophical grounding, then indeed they would be dubious about physics, or democracy, until relativism in respect to philosophical theories had been overcome. Fortunately, almost nobody believes anything of the sort" (Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 3, cited in R. Eldridge, "Rorty, Cavell, and Criticism," 112).

11. R. Eldridge, "Rorty, Cavell, and Criticism," 114.

12. Richard J. Bernstein, "Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind," *Review of Metaphysics* 33, no. 4 (June 1980): 769.

13. Cavell, "Responses," 159. Note that here Cavell has shifted away from the Anglo-American philosophy of the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps as part of a sense that while the underlying conviction of this type of epistemology remains active, the particular appearances of it in Ayer and Price have lost their weight, making some of the introductory material to *The Claim of Reason* more historically specific than it need be. Charles Bernstein reflects that "*The Claim of Reason*, in the course of its reading of the *Investigations*, also makes a full-scale case in opposition to the assumptions of the predominant tendency in professional philosophy in England and North American, that is, analytic philosophy. On this account, it may seem to those already sympathetic to Cavell's position that he spends an inordinate amount of time refuting what is obviously wrong from the first. I suspect Cavell, in part, may share that view, and it may partly explain why this work, a large section of which was written almost twenty years ago, has taken so long to come out. Cavell notes in his preface that he would not now attempt what I assume to be this aspect of the project" (C. Bernstein, "Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein," 301). This shift does *not* mean what Rorty thinks it should—namely, that we should just get on with Wittgenstein as telling us to attend to nonphilosophical problems—because Rorty misreads "the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* insofar as he thinks that Wittgenstein there urges us to stop thinking about essences and natures altogether, as though we could stop" (R. Eldridge, "Rorty, Cavell, and Criticism," 124).

refer to Kant in particular and philosophy in general as the initiators of cultural and/or individual crises.[14]

Perhaps the central strategy of Cavell's philosophizing is to ask this question—why *would*, how *could* anyone say such a thing or think it was interesting?—nonrhetorically. Because Rorty hears the question as a dismissal, he overlooks or elides the possibility that traditional philosophizing "appears on the historical scene for the sake of help with practical problems."[15] And the absence of—not even a case against or disagreement with—this view in Rorty is the reason he cannot see a connection between narrow skepticism and the problems of finitude, between "professional philosophy" and "the education of grown-ups." (In fairness to Rorty, much of professional philosophy—at least at the time in which he and Cavell are writing—not only forgets this connection but works to sever it; uncovering and tracing back this forgetting and the reasons for it occupy much of Cavell's attention for large swathes of his career.[16])

Cavell's answer to the question of why professional epistemology or narrowly skeptical questioning gets started is that skepticism is "a place, perhaps the central secular place, in which the human wish to deny the condition of human existence is expressed."[17] That is, philosophical skepticism is a particularly virulent and intellectually reflective form of a fundamental anthropological habitus. The "condition of human existence" is the one of finitude I described in the introduction; what skepticism takes issue with is the commonsense view that that finitude is (or could be) overcome by having *successful* knowledge about others or about the external world, if we could only get that knowledge to be good enough or really settle the conditions for having it.[18]

14. The most famous such response in the German context is of course the so-called Kant crisis of Heinrich von Kleist, expressed in a letter to his fiancée that discusses the impossibility of unfiltered access to the external world: "If everyone saw the world through green glasses, they would be forced to judge that everything they saw was green, and could never be sure whether their eyes saw things as they really are, or did not add something of their own to what they saw. And so it is with our intellect. We can never be certain that what we call Truth is really Truth, or whether it does not merely appear so to us. If the latter, then the Truth that we acquire here is not Truth" (Kleist to Wilhelmine von Zenge, 22 March 1801, in *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist with a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes*, ed. and trans. Philip B. Miller [New York: Dutton, 1982], 95).

15. R. Eldridge, "Rorty, Cavell, and Criticism," 115.

16. Furthermore, Cavell's undoing of this self-forgetfulness may be responsible for the most common misreading of his work—namely, that he seeks to *refute* skepticism. For a summary of this misinterpretation and a direct account of what it is Cavell does instead—i.e., acknowledge the *truth* of skepticism—see Richard Eldridge, "'A Continuing Task': Cavell and Skepticism," in *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 189–93.

17. Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 5.

18. Hence the collapse into the all-or-nothing of certain knowledge vs. relativism that I described in the introduction, and the problem of relativism for philosophy that Rorty points out. Cavell's insight is that, despite its problematic search for knowledge, skepticism gets something right about our relations to the world: "What is valuable in skepticism is its refusal to accept the common sense view of the nature of our grip on the world—a view which regards that grip as most fundamentally cognitive, regarding the existence of material objects (for example) as something which we know for certain or in which we believe" (Stephen Mulhall, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger: Orientations to the Ordinary," *European Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 [1994]: 154).

Skepticism attacks the success of that knowledge by pointing out that the grounds given for it are insufficient, but accepts the idea of cognitive *knowledge* as the ideal mode of relation to others and to the world. In doing so, the skeptic "shares in the mistake of the commonsense philosopher; but his attack upon the latter is essential in the sense that a correct understanding of our relationship to the world requires that we dispense with a commonsense understanding of that relationship."[19] Furthermore, the skeptic is at least honest, in Cavell's view, about her dissatisfaction with human finitude, and thus expresses a wish to overcome that finitude that neither traditional philosophy nor commonsense belief can put to rest.[20] Cavell calls the combination of this honesty with the awareness that, as a matter of knowledge, our relations outside finitude fail, "the truth of skepticism." But "to acknowledge the truth of skepticism is not the same as admitting that skepticism is true, for this would constitute a further escape into a new inverted metaphysics of certainty, namely relativism."[21] Being certainly uncertain would be a position as stable as that of commonsense belief; as Cavell shows in detail in his readings of tragedy, the skeptical position opens the self-protective possibility of denying any relation to the world or to others because our knowledge of them is imperfect.[22]

It is therefore unsurprising that the skeptic, faced with the uncertainty of finitude, persistently shifts back to problems of knowledge: "The real problem with skepticism, according to Cavell, is that we attempt to convert the way we inhabit the human condition into a theoretical problem and this prevents an acknowledgment of the limitedness of the human glimpsed in skepticism."[23] And one may, like Rorty, feel that Ayers and Price offer only a thin sense of this limitedness; what Cavell's attention to skepticism shows is that the all-or-nothing of knowledge as world-relation that the skeptic advances is a specialized form of a more general cultural scientism: "Scientism is the demon that haunts analytic philosophy—the

19. Mulhall, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger," 156.

20. Thus, for Cavell, "philosophy is best regarded as defined not by the knowledge of natures which people have obtained, but rather by the wish for such knowledge, expressed not only in the claiming of it, but also in the proposing of a method for acquiring it. As we try to realize this wish, we had better think hard about the fact that this wish has persisted unsatisfied throughout our history" (R. Eldridge, "Rorty, Cavell, and Criticism," 119).

21. Simon Critchley, "Cavell's 'Romanticism' and Cavell's Romanticism," in Goodman, *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, 48.

22. The denial and avoidance of others, especially, is the form of skepticism Cavell sees as taking place in Shakespeare's tragedies: to give the most obvious examples, Othello and King Lear, unable to withstand or acknowledge the love of Desdemona and Cordelia, respectively, demand *knowledge* or proof—of love, of innocence—as a way of avoiding the demands of what Cavell calls *acknowledging* others. See Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, chaps. 2 and 3. I discuss the *King Lear* essay in some detail in my reading of Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* in the section "Crisis: *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*" in chapter 4.

23. Critchley, "Cavell's 'Romanticism,'" 48. Critchley points out that "the theoreticism of skepticism is only a problem for modern, epistemological skepticism and the same claim cannot simply be made for ancient skepticism, which was not merely theoretical doubt about the truth of certain metaphysical theses but a practical doubt about the whole of one's life, a full existential *epoche*. In this light, Cavell's work might be viewed as a tacit recovery of the ethos of ancient skepticism" (48–49).

belief of science that its empirical method of prediction and control of phenomena provides the only legitimate claim to knowledge and certainty."[24] This view opens the (scientific/cognitive) knowledge-or-nothing binary I raised at the outset; Cavell enables us to see the intellectualizing of human finitude as an attempt to overcome that finitude and thus to deny the human condition. In what follows I turn to his treatments of external world and other minds skepticism to show how such intellectualizing takes place, what it forecloses, and how *acknowledging* that finitude can shift our relations to language, others, and the world. Once this shift has taken place, lyric poetry can be understood as a paradigmatic place for acknowledgments of finitude that recognize the temptation and impossibility of certain knowledge without subsiding into irrationalism or unreason.

From Knowledge to Acknowledgment

Skepticism's truth, along with its falsifying intellectualization of that truth, appears perhaps most directly in Cavell's treatment of other minds skepticism, and particularly in the essay "Knowing and Acknowledging,"[25] where Cavell lays out in detail a case for the failure of ordinary language philosophy to refute the skeptical claim that two persons cannot have "the same pain."[26] Again, this is the kind of academic, arcane example to which Rorty objects; again, Cavell traces the philosophical problem back to a problematic way of inhabiting an accurately identified condition, that of our separateness from but obligation to others.[27] In response to the claim that two people cannot have "the same pain," Cavell agrees with the skeptic's admission that we have ways of describing pain ("e.g. throbbing, dull, sharp, searing, flashing")

24. C. Bernstein, "Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein," 301. Bernstein conects this point to Habermas's distinction between kinds of knowledge in *Knowledge and Human Interest*, where Habermas "usefully contrasts two forms of knowledge—the dialogic or hermeneutic and the monologic or scientific. He differentiates the two modes by their interest component, pointing to prediction and control as the knowledge-constitutive interest of the scientific mode" (Bernstein, 300). Cavell, instead of distinguishing kinds of knowledge, distinguishes between knowledge and *acknowledgment*, as I discuss below.

25. Stanley Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238–66.

26. Cavell's other example in the essay is whether two people can see the "same" color; although this question has less immediate moral implications, it nonetheless raises the same questions of privacy and separation along the lines of an interrogation of what "sameness" means here. See Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 242–45.

27. In "Cavell on Skepticism," Rorty discusses only the arguments about external world skepticism; in fact the connection between professional philosophical questioning and lived experience is stronger in the case of skepticism about other minds, because while people in general do not walk around wondering if their tomatoes are hollow, we *do*, in everyday life, take the position that we cannot without evidence trust the actions and intentions of others, much less know how their minds exist: "There is no everyday alternative to skepticism concerning other minds. . . . I already know everything skepticism concludes, that my ignorance of the existence of others is not the fate of my natural condition as a human knower, but my way of inhabiting that condition; that I cannot close my eyes to my doubts of others and to their doubts and denials of me, that my relations with others are restricted, that I cannot trust them blindly. . . . I live my skepticism" (Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 432).

and "so you can say, if you like, that if one pain gets identified by these criteria with the same results as another (same place, same degree, same kind) then it is the same pain. But it also seems to me not *quite* right, or these criteria of identity are not quite enough, to make intelligible saying 'the same.' "[28] That is, it is the skeptic and *not* his challenger (often an ordinary language philosopher) who seems to be more in touch with when and how we use the phrase "the same" to describe pain.

The skeptic is justified in persisting in his language because he has gotten hold of something fundamental that his challenger ignores about the pain of others: "[The skeptic] begins with a full appreciation of the decisively significant facts that I may be suffering when no one else is, and no one (else) may know (or care?); and that others may be suffering and I not know, which is equally appalling";[29] furthermore: "The fundamental importance of someone's having pain is *that* he has it; and the nature of that importance—namely, that he is suffering, that he requires *attention*—is what makes it important to know where the pain is, and how severe and what kind it is."[30] Pain, as a behavior, seems to be expressive of something, and the skeptic, in asking what kind of pain it is, recognizes that the significant fact is that what is being expressed demands to be addressed.[31]

In response to this demand, however, the skeptic shifts from questions of acknowledgment (pain needs to be acknowledged) to questions of knowledge: "But then something happens, and instead of pursuing the significance of these facts, [the skeptic] is enmeshed—so it may seem—in questions of whether we can have the same suffering, one another's suffering."[32] And in arguing with the skeptic about whether or not we can have the same pain, the antiskeptic permits the skeptic's shift to the idea "that the problem of knowledge about other minds is the problem of certainty. At the same time, he neglects the fundamental insight of the skeptic by trying single-mindedly to prove its non-existence—the insight, as I wish to put it, that *certainty is not enough*."[33] To recapitulate, the skeptic identifies something crucial about our relation to others by way of the question of pain ("there *are* special problems about our knowledge of another; *exactly the problems the skeptic sees*"[34]); he then converts those problems to the realm of knowledge and certainty; the antiskeptic, in attempting to refute the skeptic, accepts this shift and thus shares in the skeptic's conversion of "metaphysical finitude" to an "intellectual lack."[35]

28. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 245.
29. Ibid., 247.
30. Ibid., 245.
31. "What [the skeptic] wants to know—namely, what it is we go on in the idea that behavior is expressive—is the right thing to want to know" (Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 262); thus, "the skeptic's problem, unlike the anti-skeptic's, is directed to what I spoke of earlier as our natural interest in the occurrence of pain, namely, *that* a given man has it" (248).
32. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 247.
33. Ibid., 258; emphasis in original.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 263.

Cavell, conversely, accepts the problems the skeptic raises about knowing others, but he rejects the intellectualizing of those problems as problems of certainty. He returns to the idea that pain makes a claim or demand on its observers, and turns (unusually for discussions of other minds) to a declaration of knowledge addressed to another person: what do I mean when I say, "I know *you* are in pain"?[36] Following the strategies of ordinary language philosophy, he explains that this remark is not an expression of certainty (it doesn't mean "I checked—you really are in pain": what could I possibly check to confirm this?) but of sympathy, and this sympathy admits the claim made on me by another's pain.[37] This claim is what, for Cavell, demands to be acknowledged, and acknowledgment, rather than the search for certainty, is what shows I understand your pain: "It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what '(your or his) being in pain' means. Is."[38] To retreat from acknowledgment to knowledge, from action to the quest for certainty, is to fall short of the claim made on me by another, and to retreat from the possibility of inhabiting our finitude in our lives with others.[39]

The difficulty of acknowledgment, however, is that it necessarily does without certainty; it does not follow automatically upon knowledge of another's having precisely *this* pain. For this reason, "sympathy may not be forthcoming. So when I say that 'We must acknowledge another's suffering, and we do that by responding to a claim upon our sympathy,' I do not mean that we always in fact *have* sympathy, nor that we always ought to have it. The claims of suffering may go unanswered."[40] Precisely because acknowledgment requires action ungrounded by certainty, the temptation arises to return to questions of knowledge, to retreat from the claim made on me by the other by asserting his separation from me.

Cavell follows out this temptation in his treatment of skepticism about other minds in *The Claim of Reason*, where it appears as a question of the relation between minds (private, hidden) and bodies (public, expressive). He tracks two inverse fears (or, as they appear in light of the denial of acknowledgment, hopes)

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid. Likewise, "acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something based on that knowledge.)" (257).

39. Cavell's notion of acknowledgment and the claims of the other upon me that are not based on knowledge or certainty marks a coincidence of his thought with that of Emmanuel Levinas, as Critchley points out: "Cavell's proximity to Levinas can be seen in the way in which the problem of skepticism (which is also extensively discussed by Levinas) opens a noncognitive relation to the other as a distinctively *ethical* insight. The Cavellian need to accept the limitedness of human cognition, the need for the acknowledgment of the other's separateness from me and my own irreducible separation can be placed alongside Levinas's account of the ethical relation to the other exceeding the bounds of knowledge" (Critchley, "Cavell's 'Romanticism,'" 54). One might also see an initial point of divergence from Heidegger in the primacy of ethics over ontology implied by the shift from knowledge to acknowledgment.

40. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," 263.

about the relation of minds and bodies: first, the idea that the body is inessential, and thus a veil or block to a more direct or genuine communication of minds; and, second, the notion that a body may hide an inhuman or nonexpressive mind, which Cavell addresses via the thought experiment of a "perfect automaton." In the first view, Cavell understands the thought of veiling not (as it is presented) as an expression of the relation between the mind and the body, but as an attempt to relocate the experience of our separateness from others into a (merely) physical realm. The fantasy of body as barrier asserts that if the body can be understood as inessential, *knowledge* of another mind could eradicate any separation between us: when I know another fully, she will no longer be other to me. Cavell explains that "in the fantasy of it as veiling, [the body] is what comes between my mind and the other's, it is the thing that separates us."[41] As long as I hold onto the assertion that bodies keep me from knowing other minds, I may deny the claim made on me by the acknowledgment of another by insisting that I have inadequate knowledge of her.

The ostensible fear that the body veils an expressive mind is reversed in the fear that others as they appear to me may be just a "something" in a body; here, too, Cavell asks how this fear comes about and what it expresses. Cavell uses the thought experiment of a perfect automaton—an extreme instance of body as veil—to ask after "the nature of the worry, if it is a real one, that there may at any human place be things that one cannot tell from human beings."[42] That is to say, what hope or fear might be behind the question "But is X really *human*?" The thought that something nonhuman could produce human expression contains both the threat that I may never know whether something is human and the hope that if I fail to know or be known it is not my fault. If knowledge of other minds is impossible, I may disavow the responsibility for others because they are unknowable and thus (potentially) alien.

Claiming the worries about the body as block to communication or guise of something alien also introduces the fear or hope that all humans, including me, may be something in human guises, and thus enables me to deny my responsibility for my own expression. As Cavell puts it, "Suppose I become convinced . . . that my body is a guise, not my original. I am harboring the idea that this body is 'mine' in something like the way my clothes are mine; but it is not—what shall I say—*me*."[43] To refuse to acknowledge my body is to dismiss a great part of my expressive capacities as not really belonging to me, only to my body. That dismissal amounts, Cavell argues, to taking myself as unintelligible and withholding my intelligibility from others. He continues Wittgenstein's insight that being intelligible to others is not a matter of their (universal, provable) *knowledge* of me; rather, "I wish to paint my conviction that I am intelligible to others, my capacity to present myself for

41. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 369.
42. Ibid., 416.
43. Ibid., 381.

acknowledgment, as my believing myself."[44] "Believing oneself" requires admitting the expressivity of the body. If the self cannot be reduced to the mind, if the body refuses to melt away, I must accept the expressions of my body as meaning what I mean, and as potentially readable to others.

And yet, there can be no absolute proof that I am intelligible or that I am acknowledging others correctly: I cannot attain the fantasized *knowledge* that would erase the other's separate identity, and the body cannot be sloughed off en route to full mental transparency. For that reason, nothing stops me from denying that I or they can mean anything at all. *Acknowledging* that I cannot erase the separation between myself and others, that I cannot finally and completely *know* them, and nonetheless taking the risk of reading them and being read by them, is what Cavell calls "let[ting] yourself matter." He elaborates:

> To let yourself matter is to acknowledge not merely how it is with you, and hence to acknowledge that you want the other to care, at least care to know. It is equally to acknowledge that your expressions . . . are yours, that you are in them. This means allowing yourself to be comprehended, something you can always deny.[45]

The possibility of directing these expressions as best we can, admitting that they may go awry, and accepting those of others while knowing that we may get them wrong is all we have of our own subjectivity. That subjectivity strives for—claims—its own ability to communicate and be understood as rational and human in and through its expressions. We may still be self-divided or self-opaque; admitting the possibility of (more or less) successful subjective expression hardly saves us from that.

Although denials of the other or of my accessibility to her will portray themselves as a matter of ignorance, the shift from acknowledging to knowledge is at bottom a maneuver of avoidance: in converting a call for acknowledgment into a claim of knowledge and then denying all possible bases of that claim, I force the demand of the other into the all-or-nothing of knowledge and certainty. Cavell sees this avoidance as the central gesture of (Shakespearean) tragedy, where avoidance as a denial of the other is carried to fatal conclusions.[46] Even in less extreme situations, following out the skeptical desire for certain knowledge of others makes us "dealer[s] of those small deaths of everyday slights, stuttered hesitations of acknowledgment, studied reductions or misdirections of gratitude, that kill intimacy and maim social existence."[47] From this standpoint, skepticism looks like an idea we would be better off without—if the yearning for certainty that underwrites

44. Ibid., 393.
45. Ibid., 383.
46. See again his reading of Othello in the final section of *The Claim of Reason*, as well as in *Disowning Knowledge*.
47. Cavell, "Responses," 159.

it leads to a denial of the humanity of persons, surely at least the commonsense view that I can know some people well enough to get on with social life is preferable. Readings and misreadings of others are of course staples of literary plots, both comic and tragic; the happy endings of marriage plots often appear to be precisely this kind of commonsense retreat to a community of two once a few misunderstandings have been cleared up. Lyric poetry, particularly in its most "hermetic" strains, may seem to give up on knowing or being-known altogether in favor of a single subject that can at least say what it wants. Literature—if understood as simply a series of interacting plots, themes, codes, forms, patterns—seems able to get along without any recourse to skepticism or quests for certainty.

Skepticism and/in the Ordinary

So why *not* just give up on the quest for certainty expressed in skepticism? If skepticism were only the misplaced and distracting set of scruples belonging to a class of professional philosophers that Rorty interprets it to be, it is true that we would be better off without it. But understanding that the skeptic gets ahold of crucial truths about the finitude of human subjectivity means understanding that to abandon skeptical yearning entirely would likewise be to abandon those truths while accepting without question the knowledge-or-nothing binary the skeptic establishes. Cavell argues for the necessity of skeptical questioning, of acknowledging both its truths and its temptations, in order to prevent the ossification of commonsense views into conventionality and injustice. In literary contexts, to abdicate the quest for certainty deprives us of the possibility of explaining the absurdly ambitious goals both Hölderlin and Rilke (and I would argue not only they) have for their poetry, as well as cutting off the possibility of claiming any relation to a literary work beyond observation or perhaps mere personal preference; poetry becomes a cryptogram to be decoded, rather than an interlocutor in a shared human concern.

The yearning for certainty expressed in skeptical questioning can lead to the transformation of convention into what Cavell calls the ordinary, in which our relations both to other minds and to the external world undergo the transformation from epistemologizing to inhabiting finitude for external world skepticism that I discussed above.[48] Finally, Cavell's considerations of the ordinary open onto the view of language based on convention I draw out of his readings of Wittgenstein to

48. Cavell also raises the possibility of acknowledgment vs. knowledge in response to external world skepticism in the first two sections of *The Claim of Reason* in his discussions of traditional epistemology and his close reading of the steps of arguments against (our knowledge of) the existence of the external world. I do not discuss these sections in detail, first, because of what Cavell calls the primacy of skepticism about other minds, and, second, because Cavell's interrogation of those steps can easily sound like a refutation of skepticism—which it is not meant to be—when taken out of the context of *The Claim of Reason* as a whole. Against this misinterpretation, see again R. Eldridge, "Cavell and Skepticism," 189–93.

ground my claim that lyric poetry works to shape and create orientations to others and the world; I can now add that those orientations are matters of acknowledgment, rather than knowledge.

Distant as such thinkers may seem from German poetry and philosophy, Cavell finds the problems of the ordinary, language, and skepticism interwoven in American transcendentalism.[49] Thoreau and Emerson take up the problem of subjective relations to the external world in a specifically post-Kantian form, thus treating external world skepticism as the problem of relations to things in themselves: "Epistemologically, [*Walden*'s] motive is the recovery of the object, in the form in which Kant left that problem and the German idealists and the romantic poets picked it up, viz., a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object."[50] But rather than beginning from a hierarchical subject/object division in which the self-conscious subject somehow has to encompass or reach the object, both Thoreau and Emerson critique the category of the thing-in-itself. That is, both thinkers contend that for all his attention to our relation to the external world, Kant fails to give an account of its externality, as such. Specifically, Kant leaves "unarticulated an essential feature (category) of objectivity itself, viz., that of *a world apart from me in which* objects are met. The externality of the world is articulated by Thoreau as its nextness to me."[51] In Cavell's reading of Emerson, our nearness to the world and the possibility (terrifying to the skeptic) that what we see in the world is only what we put there attests to our intimacy with the world. When Emerson remarks that "the universe wears our color,"[52] he acknowledges that the universe is (the skeptic would say, only, merely) what we make it. For Emerson and Thoreau, in Cavell's reading, the weight of that definition shifts: "The universe *is* what constantly . . . answers to our conceptions."[53] We have access to the world not through knowledge of its existence but precisely in that it is that which responds to our questioning.

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49. Contra this apparent distance, there are in fact several points of direct connection between American transcendentalism and German thought and poetry: Emerson and the other contributors to the *Dial* were persistently interested in both Kantian philosophy and the poetry and science of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, while Rilke himself read Emerson. Indeed, it is possible to use transcendentalism to understand Goethe's scientific texts as a project of world reclamation from the dehumanizations of modern rationalism, rather than as an inaccurate embarrassment. I have argued elsewhere that on this point, Goethe is less pre-Kantian than he often sounds. See Hannah Vandegrift Eldridge, "'Forms of Knowledge/Knowledge of Forms: The Epistemology of Goethe's West-östlicher Divan and Cavellian Skepticism," *Goethe Yearbook* 20 (2013): 147–65. For Rilke's readings of Emerson, see Marilyn Vogler Urion, "Emerson's Presence in Rilke's Imagery: Shadows of Early Influence," *Monatshefte* 85, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 153–69.

50. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden—An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 95.

51. Ibid., 107.

52. A remark that corresponds precisely to and reverses the import of Kleist's fear of "green glass in front of our eyes" in his Kant crisis. (See note 14 above.)

53. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 128.

American transcendentalism (here Emerson's "Circles," in particular) thus offers a reversal of the Kantian description of knowledge. In Emerson, the intellectual or conceptual parts of knowledge are receptive, come from outside of us, while the intuitive (perceptive) elements are spontaneous.[54] This reversal once again acknowledges the truth of skepticism: "The answer does not consist in denying skepticism, but in reconceiving its truth. It is true that we do not know the existence of the world with certainty; our relation to its existence is deeper—one in which it is accepted, that is to say, received."[55] Cavell's "favorite way of putting this is to say that existence is to be acknowledged."[56] (Of course, this may *not* happen—the observation that his culture's mode of relation to the world is one of inattention and denial drives a great part of Thoreau's discussions in *Walden*.) But to someone worried that we have no access to things in themselves, this definition of our relation to existence provides no help at all. Just as Cavell shows Wittgenstein to take the thesis of skepticism "as *undeniable*, and so [to] shif[t] its weight,"[57] he here shows Thoreau and Emerson's mode of Kantian response to be that of asking us to live in the world as those creatures who ask a world to answer them.

This relationship of acknowledgment to the external world, as with other minds, requires more than ("goes beyond") knowledge, and here, again, it is unsurprising that we often fail to live in a way that acknowledges our commitments to others and the world. If our orientations were a matter of (certain) knowledge, functioning on their own without our intervention or agreement, it would be possible to determine them once and for all and then set them aside. Thoreau diagnoses his culture—that is, American culture in the decades before the Civil War[58]—as having forgotten that it is responsible for choosing and ratifying its institutions, and thus having lost interest in its own experience, distracted by businesses of daily life (presented in *Walden* as worries about acceptability, social judgment, and economy) that are not truly necessary. Thoreau's departure for Walden Pond is, then, an attempt to wrest himself away from those businesses and to ask "questions which some would call impertinent."[59] These questions mean to interrupt the "quiet desperation," "silent melancholy," and "savage torpor" that Thoreau contends "result in part from our refusal to take an interest in our experience."[60] Asking these questions is, centrally,

54. Ibid., 129.
55. Ibid., 133.
56. Ibid.
57. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 45.
58. Cavell uses the first-person plural in discussing readers of Thoreau, thus implicitly including the late twentieth century in Thoreau's diagnoses of his era. In the early twenty-first century one might fairly say, I think, that the conditions of democracy based on mere convention and spectacle and of alienation from everyday life have—if anything—intensified, while also recognizing limited progress in the realms of individual expression and freedom (or at least the extension of what freedom there ever was to a somewhat greater number of individuals).
59. Cited in Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 46.
60. Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 117.

Thoreau's first step toward a reclaiming of the everyday or ordinary that could underwrite a renewal of community in language.

Because we may find we have no answers to Thoreau's "impertinent" questioning, because skepticism reveals that we do not have the *knowledge* we crave in our relation to the world, because we have not performed the placing and shaping of acknowledgment, the turn to the ordinary begins with an experience of strangeness, alienation, and loss—or, in my terms, of disorientation. For Cavell, as for Emerson and Wittgenstein,

> the everyday is not a network of practices or forms of life to which we can return by leaving our colleges and taking a turn in the street or a job in Woolworth's. Rather, the turn to the everyday demands that philosophy becomes *therapy* or, to use Cavell's words, "the education of grownups." That is, it becomes a way of addressing the crisis of late modernity where the everyday is concealed and ideologically repacked as "common sense," what the later Husserl rightly saw as *Lebensweltvergessenheit*. . . . The ordinary is not a ground, but a goal. It is something we are in quest of, it is the object of an inquest, it is in question.[61]

Thus Thoreau's (first-person) parable of having lost "a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove," and the travelers to whom he speaks who "seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves,"[62] "fully identifies his audience as those who realize that they have lost the world, i.e. are lost to it."[63] Acknowledging the truth of skepticism means first losing the commonsense relation to the world and then discovering that the certainty skepticism sought is not available either. Cavell describes this as a condition of "worldlessness," suspended between the conventionalism we have lost and the ordinary we cannot fully or permanently attain.[64]

That the ordinary is opposed both to inattentive daily life and to philosophical distractions marks perhaps the strongest point of similarity between Cavell's readings of Emerson and Wittgenstein and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.[65] This connection is treated extensively by Cavell himself in his discussions of Heidegger's

61. Critchley, "Cavell's 'Romanticism,'" 38.

62. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 53.

63. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 53.

64. Cavell discusses human worldlessness at length in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 33–40.

65. Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei treats Heidegger's conceptions of the everyday in relation to phenomenology and modernist literature (including Rilke) in her 2007 monograph, *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); in particular, she describes Heidegger's discussions of *Verfallenheit* as diagnosing everyday life as suffering from "denial of the fragility of everydayness" (35). Her general project is to find an "affirmative side" (4) to what has been characterized as the defamiliarization or alienation of modernist works, wherein defamiliarization renders the everyday ecstatic (see, e.g., 14). I return to her discussions of Heidegger's concepts of *Vorhandenheit* (presence-at-hand) and *Zuhandenheit* (readiness-to-hand) in my treatment of things in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (see the section "Crisis: *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*" in chapter 4).

and Emerson's perfectionism;[66] Cavell also acknowledges that Heidegger was central to his reading of *Walden* (even as *The Senses of Walden* ends by criticizing Heidegger).[67] This therefore seems an appropriate moment to recognize the numerous ideas and approaches both Cavell's project and mine in this book share with Heidegger as perhaps the most prominent philosophical proponent of poetic language and (in)famous reader of Hölderlin, even as I ultimately turn to Cavell's rather than Heidegger's view of language and subjectivity. The Heidegger of *Being and Time* shares with Cavell thematizations of anxiety and finitude (in being-toward-death), the centrality of language, and the attempt to change an inauthentic or inattentive everydayness into an inhabitation of the ordinary.[68] Particularly in his treatment of the ordinary or everyday, Heidegger shares with Wittgenstein and Cavell the awareness that our relation to the ordinary can become inauthentic either by way of inattentiveness or by way of its subjection to categories authorized by traditional philosophy.[69]

But there is also a fundamental difference in Heiddegger's and Cavell's (and here, Wittgenstein's) conception of the ordinary: Heidegger (again, the Heidegger of *Being and Time*) inherits from Husserl the "idea that the goal of philosophical inquiry is the uncovering of the underlying structures of phenomena as an essential part of grasping them in their Being as phenomena, and so of uncovering Being as such."[70] For all that Being must be approached by way of *Dasein*,[71] for all that Being may be unreachable, "in *Being and Time*, [Heidegger] attempts to provide a fundamental ontology (an account of the underlying existential structure) of Dasein as an essential preliminary to any adequate revival and engagement with the even more fundamental question of the meaning of Being."[72] Orientation to the

66. See Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The Carus Lectures, 1988 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. chap. 1.

67. "I criticize Heidegger . . . yet it is hard for me to think I would have come to my sense of *Walden* without having studied Heidegger" (Cavell, "Responses," 175).

68. "What Heidegger opposes to this average everydayness is his conception of authentic Being-in-the-world: Dasein achieves this mode by resolutely anticipating its death as its ownmost non-relational possibility, as something which lays claim to it as an individual Dasein, thus tearing itself away from the 'they' " (Mulhall, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger," 150).

69. "The focus upon an entity in its everydayness is intended as a way of avoiding the imposition of traditional or time-hallowed philosophical categories which effectively prejudge the question of the Being of any given entity. In this sense, Heidegger's concept of the everyday is opposed to that of the philosophical; it is that which philosophy represses but that without which philosophy cannot begin to move towards its goal of understanding Being" (Mulhall, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger," 149).

70. Mulhall, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger," 148.

71. *Dasein* ("being there," sometimes translated as "presence") is Heidegger's term for "the distinctive *mode* of Being realized by human beings" or "Heidegger's term for the distinctive kind of *entity* that human beings as such are," although there is some debate about this. See Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2013 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/heidegger/. Since "one way of asking the question of the meaning of Being" is to ask "What does 'to exist' mean?" it is not possible to give a definition of "Being" in Heidegger along the lines of "Being is . . ."

72. Mulhall, "Wittgenstein and Heidegger," 161.

world in language or in the ordinary is not, for Wittgenstein or for Cavell, a preliminary, however essential, to "even more fundamental question[s]"—orientation reaches all the way down; there is no more fundamental structure to be disclosed.[73] *Dasein*—or what Rilke will call *Hiersein*, being *here*—is all there is.

This structure of our relation to Being in Heidegger also underwrites the differences between his conception of poetic language and Cavell's (which I adopt). Like Cavell, Heidegger links language and finitude; unlike Cavell, Heidegger sees both in service to the revelation of Being: "Implicit and inevitable . . . is the tendency for temporality and language to press toward one another, becoming the joint medium through which Being is concealed and revealed."[74] Heidegger's conception of language thus entails a certain submission or even annihilation of the subject: "Proximity to Being will be registered by a submission to the 'speaking of Being'—to the way in which Being gives itself to language and to *Dasein*."[75] Heidegger sees the (rational, calculating) subject, as part of the subject/object distinction of traditional metaphysics, as a locus of hierarchically composed ego and will.[76] In Heidegger's picture, the poet is not and cannot be an agent—he is the "conduit of reception" of the poetized, "the *essence of what is to be said*."[77] Because Heidegger works to overcome a (for him) overly metaphysical conception of subjectivity, rather than (as I use Cavell to do) to see fragile and finite subjects as the inhabitants of an impossible yearning in which they recognize themselves, Heidegger does not see that "poetic language, as creative, enacts truth as a process of withholding emergence, a process whose element of withholding is due not principally to the self-concealment of Being, but to the finitude of the poetic self and of poetic subjectivity."[78]

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73. As is perhaps obvious from the title of his article ("Wittgenstein and Heidegger: Orientations to the Ordinary"), Mulhall does not see this distinction.

74. Stephen Melville, *Philosophy beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 53.

75. Ibid.

76. "Poetic language, as the errant-truthful historical founding and reception of Schicksal, is said to be opposed to subjectivity's ego-centrism and will" (Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger, Hölderlin, and the Subject of Poetic Language: Toward a New Poetics of Dasein* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2004], 48). Gosetti-Ferencei points out that this view is also wrong of Hölderlin in particular: "What Heidegger believes is the simple unity of the essential in poetic language obscures the thoroughly modern philosophical problematic to which Hölderlin's work is inextricably tied. This problem involves the unique paradoxes of subjectivity" (103).

77. Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger, Hölderlin*, 67.

78. Ibid., 140–41. For all the similarities between her language here and mine, Gosetti-Ferencei's project is to use Hölderlin to rescue Heidegger's robust view of poetic language from his own subject-free ontology. She thus advances the claim that "Heidegger's theory of poetic language, when not overwhelmed by the destiny of *Seinsgeschichte*'s sending, offers a new orientation for thinking in the collapse of epistemological, transcendental truth claims, and in the failure of the Enlightenment to secure, alongside the notions of human rights and autonomous freedom, a reconciliation with nature or earth against which it points the human" (142). This goal, although I am in sympathy with much of it, has two problems: first, it involves a large amount of reading Heidegger against himself, which is, second, deemed worthwhile (rather than just discarding his view altogether) based on the claim that "Martin Heidegger's theory of language, in particular in his interpretations of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, has

I draw out implications of the Cavellian (rather than Heideggerian) view of language below and in my readings of Hölderlin and Rilke; first, I want to return to the idea of a lost or forgotten ordinary or everyday in Emerson and Thoreau to connect it to community and, more specifically, to the idea of convention that grounds language use for Wittgenstein and Cavell. In *Walden*, as Cavell reads it, Thoreau sees the recasting of our relation to ourselves (as beside ourselves in a potentially positive sense) and to the world (as neighbors, of acknowledgment) as opening the possibility of a similar recasting of our moral and political lives with others. (Thoreau often figures this work as a form of bodily labor, e.g., in his discussions of sowing and harvesting; he thus also reflects on its potential failure, when the harvest does not yield fruit: "I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted . . . did not come up."[79]) Thoreau's writing of *Walden* thus presents itself as a moral, political, and poetic project of freeing language and community from their enslavement to unreflecting conformity.

In Thoreau's diagnosis, we have reduced our words to a particular institutional context through which *we* no longer mean anything with them at all. The rapid play of metaphor and punning in *Walden* (particularly around metaphors of finding/founding and metaphors of economy, worth, and value) is thus Thoreau's attempt to orient us away from our shallow and enslaved understandings of our words: the loss of meaning in democratic institutions is a symptom of "our faithlessness to

brought poetry to the forefront of philosophical thought after more than two millennia of nearly unanimous, but also highly problematic, ejection of poetry from the realm of knowledge and truth" (xi). Heidegger is hardly the only champion available for this project, and there are good reasons for not taking him as a model for the reading of poetry. First, Heidegger uses Hölderlin for a specific purpose and in a specific way that has more to do with his own philosophizing than with Hölderlin. See, e.g., Manfred Riedel, "Seinserfahrung in der Dichtung: Heideggers Weg zu Hölderlin," in *"Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch wohnet der Mensch auf dieser Erde": Heidegger und Hölderlin* (Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 20–21. Second, as Gosetti-Ferencei herself points out, Heidegger excludes Hölderlin's Kant reception as the means to rid "the poet of subjective traces in order to submit to his figuration to the Seinsgeschichte" (Gosetti-Ferencei, *Heidegger, Hölderlin*, 63), with the effect that he ignores Hölderlin's poetological work (64–65)—hardly a model for taking the problems that poets present seriously. Third, Heidegger's method of reading produces an excessive focus on the single word and thus ignores the formal shapings distinctive of poetry as opposed to other discourses: as Paul de Man remarks, "Heidegger's own language has come in for severe criticism, not without reason, for the manner in which it reduces the original text to a relentless philosophical discourse that bypasses the complexity and the nuances of the statement; at no point does Heidegger reveal an awareness of the expressive value of Hölderlin's highly deliberate formal structurization" (Paul de Man, "Patterns of Temporality in Hölderlin's 'Wie wenn am Feiertage . . . ,'" in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, ed. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993], 55). Finally, the bulk of Heidegger's readings of Hölderlin fall in the most politically suspicious time span of Heidegger's career, between the Rhektoratsrede in 1933 and his unedited reprinting of "Was heißt Metaphysik?" in 1953 with its infamous "sentence in which the 'unrealized' or hidden verity of National Socialism was first invoked" (George Steiner, "Heidegger, Again," *Salmagundi* 82/83 [1989]: 49). The publication of the "Black Notebooks" in March 2014—which Gosetti-Ferencei did not have the benefit of consulting—has raised even more questions about the possibility of separating Heidegger's Nazism from his philosophical thought.

79. Thoreau, *Walden*, 209.

our language."[80] Thoreau, in his metaphors, "is doing with our ordinary assertions what Wittgenstein does with our more patently philosophical assertions—bringing them back to a context in which they are alive. It is the appeal from ordinary language to itself."[81] This is what I will argue Hölderlin and Rilke are doing, aided perhaps in ways Thoreau is not by the formal complexity and density of lyric poetry; Thoreau wants to "seek a justness [. . . of writing], its happy injuries, ecstasies of exactness," that will "feel like a discovery of the a priori, a necessity of language and of the world, coming to light. . . . That these words should lay aside their differences and join upon this ground of sense, proposes a world which mocks the squalor and cowardice of our imaginations."[82]

Language, Grammar, and Forms of Life

This seems like a lot for language to accomplish, and Thoreau's project may seem to be merely literary—it is, after all, based on our reevaluation of our words and our standing in language. But Thoreau's point is precisely that we have the same sense of mere literariness about our lives.[83] We treat our lives as though they do not really matter; part of the task of *Walden* is the undercutting of the "mereness" of the literary. I contend that this undercutting is enabled by a view of language use like the one Cavell reads out of Wittgenstein. Cavell draws on Wittgenstein's later views of language to argue that "we learn language and learn the world *together*."[84] This view defines itself in opposition or resistance to a cultural conviction as old as Plato—namely, the conviction that language ideally is or ought to be a system of *reference* to a reality that somehow exists by itself, apart from being perceived and talked about, and that names of objects, in particular, can be true or false of reality, which in turn simply and actually divides up into categories that can be named with an accuracy that philosophy ought to investigate.[85]

For Cavell, however, following Wittgenstein, "learning a language is not learning the names of things outside language, as if it were simply a matter of

80. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 66.

81. Ibid., 92.

82. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 44.

83. "We do not believe in our lives, and so trade them for stories; their real history is more interesting than anything we now know" (Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 81).

84. Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?," 19. As I explained in the introduction, this is an accepted but not universal view of Wittgenstein's post-*Tractatus* depictions of language. See note 5 in the introduction.

85. For a full reading of this conviction, see Bernard Harrison, "Imagined Worlds and the real one: Plato, Wittgenstein, and Mimesis," in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 94. Harrison explains this conviction as one that language is "empty of reality, a mere notation." In this picture, reality "just does divide up into certain categories of nameable elements, and it is the business of philosophical inquiry . . . to determine the identity and nature of those categories of elements" (94).

matching up signifiers with signifieds, as if signifieds already existed and we were just learning new names for them. . . . Rather, we are initiated by language into a socious, which is for us the world."[86] Hence, for Cavell, the continued interest and importance (*pace* Rorty) of ordinary language philosophy, particularly Austin: "The philosophy of ordinary language concerns itself with everything that we talk about in language. In this sense, philosophy speaks of nothing but language, and Austin in particular has lots to say about differences language marks."[87] Austin's distinctions—specialized and particular as they may seem—bespeak the relation "between language and the world, but not in the traditional analytic terms of realism or correspondence . . . [but rather] in terms . . . of a *harmony* between words and world."[88] Finding out something about language thus entails finding out something about the world; discovering something about what Wittgenstein calls grammar means uncovering something about what he calls a form of life. And so whatever lyric poetry discovers about language, it will also discover about the form of life from which it emerges; changing language also entails changing a form of life.

Moreover, the connections between grammar and forms of life found the intelligibility of language: we can understand other speakers because language is not arbitrary. Thus "Wittgenstein's relation of grammar and criteria to 'forms of life'" shows that "human convention is not arbitrary but constitutive of significant speech and activity," and thus that "mutual understanding, and hence language, depends on nothing more and nothing less than shared forms of life."[89] But this vision of language runs into several difficulties: first, although we learn and use words in practical contexts and generally do seem to agree on how they can be extended or projected from one meaning or context to another, this happens without the underpinning of universal *rules* that ground and legislate the correct use of language. And any view that suggests that language can communicate just because, in general, it does so will seem alarmingly unstable:

> Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but

86. C. Bernstein, "Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein," 299.
87. Sandra Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary: Austin *after* Cavell," in Goodman, *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, 97.
88. Ibid., 98.
89. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 168.

> nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.[90]

Wittgenstein's vision is terrifying precisely because it reveals the degree to which communication, teaching, talking, and all the manifold activities human subjects complete in language rest on nothing more than what Cavell calls *convention*.

Moreover, because there are no universal rules governing language use, the temptation emerges to deem all usage merely private, or as arbitrary as if it were private, particularly because language use does change over time, idiom, and circumstance:

> The meaning of words *will*, of course, stretch and shrink, and they will be stretched and be shrunk. . . . It is a wonderful step towards understanding the abutment of language and the world when we see it to be a matter of convention. But this idea, like every other, endangers as it releases the imagination. For some will then suppose that a private meaning is not more arbitrary than one arrived at publicly, and that since language inevitably changes, there is no reason not to change it arbitrarily.[91]

From this perspective, efforts to enforce communicability may read as coercive; it may seem sensible to give up on communication altogether in the interest of an expressive community of a single subject, which can at least say what it wants. But understanding language use as based on convention, which may be challenged (Cavell's word is "convened upon") at any time begins to suggest the ways in which poetry, as a genre that often works on the edge of what is linguistically permissible while deploying and challenging conventions of understanding, can seek orientations in language that are neither coercive nor solipsistic.

One response to the absence of rules for reference and meaning is the turn to criteria as a means to control and universalize both language and knowledge. The thought would be that if we have really settled criteria (signs, signals, behaviors) for calling something by a given word, then it ought to be possible to get to universal agreement that a given word applies in a given situation. Cavell again uses the example of another person's pain, considering the case of a person who, in a situation that we might logically suppose to be painful, exhibits all the criteria of being in pain—whimpering and screaming, wringing his hands, and so on—who nonetheless insists that he is only "calling his hamsters."[92] Should the hamsters in fact appear in response to such behavior, we had better believe him. But the worry such a scenario (in an extreme version) presents is that we can never know if someone really is in pain—he may be faking it, he may be deranged, or he may be calling

90. Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* 52.

91. Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?," 42.

92. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 88.

his hamsters. Criteria will not solve the problem of another person's pain or enable us to have knowledge of it (rather than, as I argued above, to acknowledge it); and therefore, "criteria are disappointing. They do not assure that my words reach all the way to the pain of others."[93] Criteria and convention, then, are crucially not controls on our *knowledge* of the world, of ourselves, or of others.

Because language functions without appeals either to an external world of referents or an internal system of criteria, "it may be hard to make out that the weaving of language here is something more than a shuttling of fortune."[94] And this, indeed, is the conclusion arrived at in literary-theoretical approaches that proceed from the "unreliability" of language. Bernstein sees Cavell and Jacques Derrida (in *Of Grammatology*), in particular, as similar "in respect to getting rid of the idea that words refer to metaphysical absolutes, to universals, to 'transcendental signifieds,' rather than being part of a grammar of shared conventions, a grammatology."[95] Both see that it is correct that, by the standard of universal rules, language is unreliable.

Where Derrida and Wittgenstein (in Cavell's reading) differ is in their response to this unreliability:

> What Derrida ends up transforming to houses of cards—shimmering traces of life, as insubstantial as elusive—Wittgenstein locates as *meaning*, with the full range of intention, responsibility, coherence, and possibility for revolt against or madness without. In Wittgenstein's accounting, one is not left sealed off from the world with only "markings" to "decipher" to but rather *located* in a world with meanings to *respond* to.[96]

Being "sealed off" is both the fear (that I cannot reach the world or others) and the desire (therefore I am not responsible for others or the world, and they cannot reach me) of skepticism as an expression of the yearning to transcend finitude as I read it above. Here I want to emphasize Bernstein's insight that Derrida, like the skeptic, misinterprets what Bernstein calls "the lesson of metaphysical finitude," that is, the confrontation of individual subjects with their own delimitedness: where Derrida sees only "codes" or "marks," and denies the possibility of presence, Cavell takes the lesson from Wittgenstein that any kind of "presence" (to continue Derrida's term) we may have comes only from shared grammar in a form of life.[97]

93. Ibid., 79.
94. Ibid., 94.
95. C. Bernstein, "Reading Cavell Reading Wittgenstein," 304.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid. Bernstein argues further that Derrida thus "ends up in a situation comparable to the traditional epistemologist in *The Claim of Reason*, who misunderstands the implications of the discovery that the experience of knowing things in terms of their presence to us does not mean these things are 'transcendentally' present and so imagines there is something wrong with presence itself, that it is illegitimate or failed, as if presence could only be of this kind" (304). Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie make this point with almost startling directness: recalling "Cavell's oft-repeated point that there is in

I discuss the notion of language's "unreliability" or "indeterminacy" at some length not because Cavell's usefulness emerges only in contrast to it, nor because it is necessarily the predominant view in literary studies,[98] but because adherence to it absolutely prohibits an understanding of lyric poetry as performing the kinds of orientation for which I argue. I therefore offer at least a preliminary case against this view in order to show how my work gets past the kind of knowledge-or-nothing binary that poststructuralism, like professional skepticism, accepts. Moving from discussions of the unreliability of language to its effects on literary interpretation, Paul de Man discusses "indeterminacy" particularly clearly in his introduction to *Allegories of Reading*, where he treats the final question of Yeats's poem "Among Schoolchildren."[99] Reading the question "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" first literally/grammatically and then rhetorically, de Man holds that the literal reading expresses despair about the possibility of *distinguishing* dancer from dance, creator from artwork, whereas the rhetorical reading celebrates the organic unity of artist and artwork unfolded throughout the poem.[100] For de Man, the presence of two contradictory and yet connected readings indicates the fundamental indeterminacy of literary texts; despite his own virtuosity in reading Yeats and Proust, he asserts that the end stage of critical interrogation of a text is inevitably a "state of suspended ignorance."[101]

This "undecidability" or "unreliability" of language, particularly literary language, highlights the precipitousness with which deconstructive reading moves

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fact nothing more human than the desire to transcend the human (to become, even, somehow inhuman or post-human)," they point out that "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 human impulses—the wish humans have always had to transcend their own finitude" (Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, "Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, ed. Eldridge and Rhie [New York: Continuum, 2011], 5).

98. Indeed, I share the reaction of Hans Adler and Sabine Groß when they point out, in response to the claims of cognitive literary studies to rescue the field from poststructuralist theory, that such an approach "accord[s] poststructuralism—with its admittedly high visibility and demonstrated potential for arousing opposition—too much weight. Setting up versions of poststructuralism as the enemy . . . ignores the prevalence of other types of literary study that, in terms of publication output, vastly outnumber deconstructive and poststructuralist analyses and theoretical essays" (Hans Adler and Sabine Groß, "Adjusting the Frame: Comments on Cognitivism and Literature," *Poetics Today* 23 [2002]: 202).

99. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 11–12.

100. De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 11–12. Cavell points out quite rightly that de Man performs his "literal" reading too narrowly, since "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" cannot, in fact, be unproblematically reduced to "How can we *tell dancer and dance apart*?" (Cavell, "Politics as Opposed to What?," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 [1982]: 170). Cavell suggests a further reading—namely, that Yeats's interest in knowing *from* asks a different question: "How can we know the dancer from, meaning by means of, the dance; how is that the dance can reveal the dancer"? (171). This interpretation is in line with Cavell's interests in problems of knowing versus acknowledging others based on behavior. Cavell also connects these problems of knowing with de Man's refusal of referentiality in favor of rhetorical/figural criticism. Cavell, "Politics," 172; compare with de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 3–4.

101. De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 19.

from the observation that multiple, even contradictory readings may be plausible for any given passage of text to the assertion that language is fundamentally unreliable, that misreading and misunderstanding are necessary or inevitable.[102] But there is no reason to assume that the plurality of possible interpretations points to the hopelessness of communication and the unreliability of language; quite the opposite: the multiplicity and complexity of literary texts make them particularly suited to the investigation of expressive possibilities.[103] In rejecting the kind of universal, rule-grounded underpinnings for language that Cavell and Wittgenstein agree we must do without, poststructuralist thought misconstrues the implications of that rejection and forces language into an all-or-nothing that denies the possibility that linguistic attunement and convention might provide the kinds of world orientation that I investigate in poetry.

If, however, we turn to the Wittgensteinian view of use rather than reference, the idea that we learn language and the world together already suggests how recasting our relation to or in our language might reorient our relations to the world and to others. As the deconstructive and skeptical views emphasize, the difficult part of this view is the discovery that

> the radical absence of any foundation for the claim to "say what we say" . . . is not a mark of any absence of logical rigor or rational certitude in the procedure that arises from this claim. . . . This is the meaning of what Wittgenstein says about our "agreements in judgment" and in language: it is not founded on anything but itself, on *us*.[104]

This may make it sound as though Wittgenstein and Cavell want to solve all our problems of language use and world orientation simply by getting everybody to speak good English (German)—a kind of conformist/prescriptivist reading of Wittgenstein's "grammar."[105] The question might—and indeed should—arise of

102. Martin Stone, "On the Old Saw, 'Every Reading of a Text Is an Interpretation': Some Remarks," in Gibson and Huemer, *Literary Wittgenstein*, 200.

103. "The 'indeterminacy' which is the correlate of critical pluralism in literature is not—*pace* de Man—any sort of defect or failure. To the contrary, that literature lends itself to multiple and divergent readings is apparently one of the things we most value about it" (Stone, "On the Old Saw," 202).

104. Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary," 86.

105. Hence the misunderstanding that Cavell's and Austin's emphasis on "what we say" or "what we would normally say" represents a "form of 'commons-room' authoritarianism" (R. Eldridge and Rhie, "Consequences of Skepticism," 3). Laugier sees this as part of Rorty's misinterpretation of Cavell and Wittgenstein: " 'The acceptance of our form of life,' immanence, does not afford us a pat response to philosophical problems. Wittgenstein certainly would not have appreciated certain talk nowadays of supposedly Wittgensteinian inspiration, in which 'the acceptance of our form of life' becomes a flight from every investigation or questioning of our forms of life, and a pretext for talk about the end of philosophy. Rorty's reading and use of Wittgenstein is clearly guided by this sort of 'conformist' interpretation of form of life" (Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary," 86); "The strength of Cavell's analysis in chapter 5 of *The Claim of Reason*—and what fundamentally distinguishes it from Rorty's analysis of community and convention—is that it makes us revisit the profoundly problematic character of every appeal to convention, and the difficulty therefore of locating a 'conventionalism' in Wittgenstein" (89).

just who the "we" in "what we say" is; more broadly, how is the community whose agreement (how documented?) grounds language use identified, and what are its limits and scope? *Whose* form of life is it? Especially given that I claim repeatedly that lyric poetry in general, and the poetry of Hölderlin and Rilke in particular, do something for (to?) their readers, it may seem necessary to get some hard data about who those readers were or are, perhaps via reviews or publication statistics or library subscriptions or book fair catalogs. Or perhaps the claim that poetry orients readers needs some information about how readers read—what are the cognitive processes involved, what are the medial and sociohistorical conditions of reading in play?[106] But here the question of how communities of use come about—of how any single "I" can say "what *we* say"—joins the problems of ordinary language philosophy to the problems of skepticism and its truth. Cavell's work shows a repeated awareness that the "agreements" discussed in Wittgenstein (and in Austin) are founded on neither, as it were, polling data, nor universal rules.[107]

Instead, just as the skeptic, in her discovery that certain knowledge is not available or enough, gets hold of a crucial truth about human finitude, "the lack of any external foundation for our agreement in language" tells us something fundmental about our language use and the communicative rationality we use it to claim.[108] As both Sandra Laugier and Simon Critchley point out, Cavell's attention to the fragility of "forms of life" goes beyond the "breathtaking cultural and political complacency of much that passes for Wittgensteinian philosophizing."[109] In recognizing that nothing grounds the claim of "what I say" other than an individual voice asking for agreement, "Cavell shows at once the fragility and the depth of our agreements, and he seeks out the very nature of the necessity that emerges, for

106. That literary studies does not, in general, take account of how "normal" readers read is a main critique leveled at it by certain types of scholarship influenced by the natural sciences, most particularly neuroaesthetics. For example, David S. Miall argues that literary interpretation tells us little about how ordinary readers read and blames literary scholarship for "a decline in reading." See David S. Miall, "Experimental Approaches to Reader Responses to Literature," in *New Directions in Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, ed. Paul Locher et al. (Amityville, NY: Baywood Press, 2006), 176–78. Even if literary scholarship is to blame for a decline in reading, it is doubtful that Miall's turn to neuroscience is going to help: sentences such as "The neuropsychological work reported here supports the theorized function of foregrounding in literary response, suggesting that RH [right hemisphere] processes facilitate a reconceptualization, analogous to the solution of an insight problem, that occurs downstream from the initial response" are not exactly a clarion call for literary reading (Miall, "Neuroaesthetics of Literary Reading," in *Neuroaesthetics*, ed. Martin Skov et al. [Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing, 2009], 239).

107. "The agreement of which Austin and Wittgenstein speak does not have the character of an intersubjective agreement: it is not founded on a 'convention' or on any actual act of agreeing, entered into by already civilized speakers. . . . But what is this agreement? Where does it come from, and why should we give it such authority? That is the problem for Cavell. In all his work, he raises the question: what permits Austin and Wittgenstein to *say what they say about what we say*?" (Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary," 85). Of course, data about who uses what language in what way, and even some efforts at universal rules about languages, do have an informative and intellectually rigorous place, which is linguistics, not ordinary language philosophy.

108. Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary," 86.

109. Critchley, "Cavell's 'Romanticism,'" 38.

Wittgenstein, from our human form of life."[110] The response Cavell, with Wittgenstein, calls for in answer to any of the myriad ways in which our forms of life with language can go awry is not the discarding of criteria or the declaring of language to be arbitrary, but rather, "a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me."[111]

Hence the importance of (individual) voice or voices in all of Cavell, Wittgenstein, Kant (on aesthetic judgments), and Austin (in his investigations of ordinary language). What I say, or what we say, are matters for *Übereinstimmung* ("agreement," but including the word for "voice," *Stimme*):

> A judgment of taste demands universal assent, "and in fact everyone expects this assent [*Einstimmung*]." What sustains this pretension is what Kant calls a universal voice (*allgemeine Stimme*). In Wittgenstein as in Kant, this is a voice that is to be understood in terms of the idea of agreement: *übereinstimmen* is the verb employed by Wittgenstein to describe our agreement in language (PI, 241–42).[112]

But because there are no universal rules governing any of "grammar," judgments of beauty, or "what we say," this agreement is always one that must be sought rather than assumed. Likewise, communities in which such agreement might take place are not defined by criteria or external features (still less by rules), but by the acknowledgment of others: "The question of community . . . is not one issue but a whole complex of interrelated public and private issues. . . . A community consists of any or all of those persons who have the capacity to acknowledge what others among them are doing."[113]

As for communities of readers, neither Hölderlin nor Rilke writes for some nebulously defined "ordinary" reader (and indeed, Hölderlin in particular found very few readers in his lifetime). Both poets, per the readings of their poetologies that I perform in chapters 2 and 4, quite deliberately undertake to *denormalize* their readers' reading experiences in the name of changing their relationships to language and to the world—and at least as matters currently stand, none of cognitive experiments on readers, reader surveys, historical publication information, study of libraries, or sociologies of reading will be able to give much information about that. In claiming that something happens in a poem for (or even to) the reader, the

110. Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary," 86.

111. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 125.

112. Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary," 94.

113. Lyn Hejinian, "Who Is Speaking?," in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 34. Hejinian's further ruminations on community, however, call attention to the fact that those convening are not groups (how established or determined?) gathered in advance of convening on language and then polled retroactively for their agreement (36–37).

only evidence I can offer is my own experience of reading, together with the invitation to my readers to share in that experience and to value in the poems what I find important in them. Historical, linguistic, or philological information can all be helpful—indeed essential—in avoiding errors of interpretation and increasing understanding of complicated poetic language. Even so, none of the information they offer will be able to *prove* that a poem does what I say it does for any given reader.

In addition to its arrogance, this claim entails a certain vulnerability, one that Cavell addresses in three essays on philosophy and criticism, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," "A Matter of Meaning It," and "Music Discomposed." He concludes "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" with a reflection on the fundamental difference between philosophy (modern philosophy, aesthetic philosophy, or—what I take my readings to perform—criticism) and proof: "Philosophy, like art, is, and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have. All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own."[114] The (occasionally disorienting) lyric orientations I find in Hölderlin and Rilke—again, processual rather than referential, communal rather than universal, and responsive to rather than imposed on an external object-world—share the tenuous status of language use and relations to others in Cavell's Wittgensteinian picture of language. They are grounded on nothing more, and nothing less, than the search for an agreement that may always fail.

114. Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* 96.