

AAR

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Cavell, Companionship,
and Christian Theology

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Preface

Theology has always been in conversation with philosophy. Those conversations can be amicable, antagonistic, illuminating, uncomprehending. In the English-speaking world in recent decades, those conversations have been wide ranging. But few theologians have taken up the work of the man Richard Rorty referred to as “the least defended, the gutsiest, the most vulnerable” of American philosophers—Stanley Cavell.¹

As the analytic tradition came under increasing pressure in the late twentieth century, its mid-century orthodoxies increasingly worn, those challenging it or those on its fringes became important resources. Theologians, in particular, welcomed neo-Aristotelianism, pragmatism, and poststructuralism. But somehow Cavell got missed, allowed to fall through the cracks between, say, Dewey and Derrida. Cavell’s relative obscurity in philosophy departments is perhaps not surprising. Cavell wrote books on Emerson and Thoreau, a book on Shakespeare, and three books on film and, to the annoyance of many colleagues, called them all philosophy. His repeated gestures toward theology didn’t help him in many philosophical circles, but they do make the theologians’ lack of interest all the more disturbing. Like a few of the French postmodernists, and unlike the Anglo-American analytical philosophers, Cavell cannot let go of the issue of faith. He once told an interviewer, “To choose between Judaism and Christianity is, I suppose, still a live issue for me.”² Cavell is fascinated

by Christian theology and by the figure of Christ in the way few post-Enlightenment philosophers have been. In this book, I offer an account of Cavell's fascination with theology and what Christians might learn from him.

I do so in part by entering a highly charged debate about things like "communitarianism," "liberalism," and "new traditionalism."³ I will develop an account of companionship that might thicken, and thereby strengthen, the influential theological turn toward community. Although it may seem to some that I undermine community, I intend an account of companionship that will be compelling enough to rescue community from the cliché it threatens to become. In so doing, perhaps these pages can also offer succor to some of those trying to account for their sense of alienation from, or suffocation within, the church.

Part I places Cavell alongside a few of the most influential recent philosophers writing in English: Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and John Rawls. Those chapters make clear what is distinctive about Cavell's moral and political philosophy, and they expose some inadequacies of communitarianism and liberalism. In MacIntyre, I locate a disturbing insensitivity and contempt directed at "the modern subject." In Nussbaum and Rawls, I locate an impatience with the complaints of victims of the liberalism they defend. Hence, chapter 3 relies on the fiction of W. G. Sebald to provide an extended display of the sort of companionship Cavell offers as an alternative, an alternative that preserves, even heightens, MacIntyre's sense of catastrophe, yet replaces his contempt with compassion and his self-exemption with solidarity. Chapter 4 begins to extend those lessons to ecclesiology.

Part I may be read as a distinct and independent survey of standard options in moral and political philosophy as they converse with Cavell. But my interest in MacIntyre and Rawls/Nussbaum is in the way communitarianism and liberalism have influenced contemporary debates in Christian theology. Hence, part I also may be read as ground clearing. The critique of MacIntyre and Rawls/Nussbaum is in service of prying theology loose from them in order to replace, or at least supplement, their views with those of Cavell. Cavell occupies, or has created, a unique space between philosophy and theology that deserves to be explored because of the ways he illuminates and instructs both philosophy and theology. His struggles with philosophy's history seem to me like admirable ways for theology to struggle with its history. Moreover, his struggles have enabled him to think about theology, and philosophy's relationship to it, without the animus of so much of twentieth-century analytic philosophy. Cavell is famous for having challenged the conventional boundaries between philosophy and literature. He deserves to be equally famous for challenging the conventional boundaries between philosophy and theology.

Demonstrating that, however, makes for a more complex, less linear stretch of writing than what is offered in part I. Part II begins by stepping back to look more closely at the heart of Cavell's work. I provide in chapter 5 an extended reading of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell's lengthy, category-defying investigation and diagnosis of modern skepticism and, therefore, of modern philosophy. Skepticism, Cavell argues, is not an intellectual mistake. The problem with skeptics is not that they are incompetent. There is no piece of information about the world or about others with which we can provide them. Skepticism is a condition, a frame of mind. The curious parlor games of the philosopher—how do you know you are not dreaming? what if he is an automaton?—are interpretations of common, everyday experiences. Cavell's response to this kind of skepticism is to ask a very simple but counterintuitive question: what if skepticism is not the product of the failure of knowledge, but of its success? What if skepticism is a cover, an excuse for our estrangement from others? "In making the knowledge of others a metaphysical difficulty, philosophers deny how real the practical difficulty is of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another's gaze, or bear of it."⁴ Or elsewhere, "This is what I have throughout kept arriving at as the cause of skepticism—the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty.... ('To interpret a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack.')." ⁵

Scattered throughout *The Claim of Reason* are references to Christianity. "The crucified human body is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul."⁶ "You may battle against the Christian's self-understanding from within Christianity, as Kierkegaard declares, or from beyond Christianity, as Nietzsche declares. In both cases you are embattled because you find the *words* of the Christian to be the right words."⁷ Chapter 6 documents these references to theology, Christianity, and the figure of Christ from a variety of places, not just *The Claim of Reason*, in an attempt to map the space between philosophy and theology that Cavell has created. Stephen Mulhall, one of Cavell's best readers, writes, "The question of Cavell's understanding of his relationship with religion is not merely one element amongst others in his work, but the most fundamental and revealing of his preoccupations."⁸ While I sometimes differ with Mulhall's interpretations, this book is in many ways a continuation of his exemplary work on Cavell and Christianity.⁹

Cavell once wrote that Christianity is something "I am not in a position to share but to admire and rejoice in."¹⁰ Chapter 6 brings Cavell and theology into close proximity and reveals their affinities. It shows, with help from Rowan Williams, the most Cavellian of contemporary theologians, why Christianity is

something Cavell admires and rejoices in. Chapters 7 and 8 use these two thinkers to work out each other's differences, to show why, despite Cavell's admiration, Christianity is not something he is in a position to share.

I hope both Cavellian philosophers and Christian theologians (and those who aren't sure where they belong) find this book of some use, and will discover each other to be the kinds of friends whom Emerson called "beautiful enemies." But I am all too aware of the weaknesses that both philosophers and theologians will find throughout this text. It is not to excuse such inadequacy that I add that I also hope this book is something of what Robert Pogue Harrison, introducing his *Dominion of the Dead*, called "a reader's book."

Some books are writer's books, in that their authors undertake the largest share of the labor, do most of the thinking, circumscribe (as much as possible) the horizon of reference, and draw the final conclusions. *The Dominion of the Dead* is different. It is more like a net than a cloth. Its articulation is full of empty spaces for the reader to enter and wander about in. It calls on its interlocutor not only to think along with the author but to establish independent connections, leap over abysses, pursue his or her own paths of inquiry, bring to bear adventitious considerations, and, through the tracings offered here, discover the topic for him- or herself. Given its intrinsic limitations (of which I am all too aware), I have tried to turn my approach into one that opens rather than closes the horizon of speculation.¹¹

The Ordinary

An Introduction to Stanley Cavell

Fathers and Strangers

The main discipline is to keep finding life strange (this is the extent, and intent, of spirituality in me).¹

“A Cover Letter to Molière’s *Misanthrope*” is as beautiful as anything Cavell ever wrote, and Cavell says that the essay “sees things together in a way that nothing else I have done quite manages.”² By “sees things together,” I take it he means that the essay manages to gather and condense, in the space of its eight exquisite pages, some guiding concerns of Cavell’s—not just skepticism and ordinary language but also conformity, narcissism, resistance, consent, youth, violence. How it does so will require more than this introduction, but I begin here as a way of introducing themes that will circulate throughout the later, more extensive engagements with his work. Cavell’s lifelong preoccupation has been what he calls “preserving the threat of skepticism,” refusing to refute or ignore the skeptic, yet without being a skeptic himself, to keep the skeptic’s problem alive while not caving in to it. In the “Cover Letter,” Alceste stands in for the skeptic, and Cavell’s ambivalence concerning Alceste and his misanthropy parallels his ambivalence concerning skepticism. Importantly, it also makes clear the political stake in such ambivalence.

Alceste, the protagonist of Molière’s play, is a misanthropic young man who has given up on human society. He has become

disgusted with its charades and deceits, its show, artifice, and insincerity. All of it he finds pervaded by hypocrisy and so chooses to abandon it, and he proposes to Célimène that she go with him, that she also abandon the world, in order to find the whole world in him. One response to *Alceste*, Cavell's first response, at the end of the first paragraph, is simply to say, "The world isn't perfect. No one promised that it would be. Society requires compromises and sacrifices. That's just the way it is and only your adolescent idealism keeps you from understanding that so grow up." That is a pretty common response, and it may be a reasonable one. But Cavell is more interested in the question that follows "grow up": "Why is this not the end of the matter?" (98). Why, that is, do we still find *Alceste* so important? Why do Célimène and Arsinoé and Philinte still love him and end the play by going to search for him? Why can't they, like Judith Shklar,³ just say "grow up" and abandon him as he has abandoned us? Why can't they realize, like Ben Franklin, the hero of Shklar's essay, that "private affections [are] not politically relevant"? That "a democratic 'social fabric' would 'come undone'...if everyone were always 'wholly frank with everyone.'" Why don't they understand "the demands of democratic assemblies"? "Liberal democracy is a process that requires particularly obvious and vulnerable hypocrisies."⁴

My old friend Judith Shklar is saying publicly that you finally lost the woman you love. This implies at the least that Célimène is right to refuse your offer of marriage with its condition that she abandon the remainder of the world, that she find the whole world in you. So I have to tell you that I agree with this verdict and will say so publicly. I will, however, go on to claim that the more significant fact, the mystery of your misanthropy, is that Célimène loves you, that they all love you...; that they do not give you up but end their play by going to seek you out. Quite as if they think you are right, even if placed in the wrong, and cannot want to live without the thing you mean to them. (100–101)

"What do you mean to them?" The fact that, for Cavell, it is not the end of the matter is crucial for understanding not just his differences with Shklar but his response to skepticism, his wish to tarry with it, not overcome it, his willingness to leave room for refusing the world, for the attempt to escape or deny an existence shared with others. Skepticism converges with narcissism as "a power that all who possess language possess and may desire: to dissociate oneself, excommunicate oneself from the community in whose agreement, mutual attunement, words exist."⁵

Perhaps, Cavell suggests, *Alceste* thinks he represents purity in opposition to society's corruption. But, he goes on, maybe it is better to say that *Alceste*

represents purity to society's sense of purity lost—"not as if corrupted exactly but as if misplaced, thus still present somehow" (98). A purity we had to give up when we grew up, had to lay aside when we consented to the world. So Alceste reminds us that we had something like a choice in the matter, one we may have made out of fear, and that another option, the one he chooses, or is trying to create, is to refuse consent to a world found uninhabitable and to have the courage for the loneliness that such a choice entails. But how does it happen that the world comes to seem uninhabitable? "*What is the feeling?* Evidently it must be understood as a mode of disgust, a repugnance at the idea that your life should partake of the world's, that what it does, you do; or is it at the idea that the world's life partakes of yours, that what you feel, it feels? . . . I believe in the potential epistemological significance of this mode of disgust" (99).

That means Cavell believes in the epistemological significance of adolescence, a significance discovered by Hamlet and, later, by Rousseau and Emerson, Nietzsche and Nabokov. For adolescence is the place at which consent to adulthood is most clearly in view and where the hypocrisy of adults, or at least the world of adults, is most clearly exposed. It "is invented as the time of preparing for that agreement, and is ended by it." It is the place where "the tribe shifts the responsibility for its pain from its back onto yours; and instead of opening secrets to you, it informs you that it has none, that what you see is all there is to it. Hence to its recruits it is now reduced merely to *saying* 'Grow up'" (100).⁶ To saying, "Emerson is for sophomores."⁷ To saying that the wish to want the world, to have a world worth wanting, is "unrealistic." In refusing Alceste, we may refuse the reminders that "the tyrant's power continues to require our complicitous tyranny over ourselves" (102) and that "most of us will mostly go along with the tide of events, and even argue that we (mostly) ought to" (103).

Shklar located a modern version of Alceste in the student radicals of the 1960s.⁸ But "was hypocrisy really the charge that the students brought against America a few years ago? Their claim was to be in revolt because revolted, because horrified, by what they were being asked to consent to" (104). The horrors of our war machines live off our inability to cultivate disgust at what we have consented to. "My question here is whether one is prepared to credit revulsion and horror as conceivably political responses, as perhaps the only epistemological access to the state of the world" (104). (Are you or are you not revolted and horrified by the "war on terrorism" *and* the way your life partakes of the country which is waging it?) Are we prepared to credit Alceste's wish to withdraw with Célimène as a conceivably political response, a response worth honoring? Are we prepared to honor the turn to exclusive intimacy that emerges from revulsion at the world? To honor the sense that the chance for being

known by one other is all that is left us, to hope for companionship as we despair of community? (You may wish to linger here with, say, Huck and Jim before we get to Othello and Desdemona.)

From another angle, we might say that Alceste presents us with what we may have forgotten or ignored or repressed and therefore offers us as “consenting adult[s] in a world of horrors (thus, as Rousseau and Thoreau perceive, a conspirator[s] of that world, chained by partialities) confronting [ourselves] with the chance to forgive [ourselves], hence the chance to start again” (102). In Alceste’s refusal to consent, we are offered the chance to reconsider our refusal to refuse. “You see that I would try to tempt you back” (102) for his sake and for ours. Cavell presents Alceste with the conviction “that there are those in the world who have not forgotten what you know, hence who feel the rebuke in your taking offense” (102), yet they have found a way both to remember what Alceste knows and to accept the world, have found a way of growing up without growing up. With luck, they may be better prepared to evade the tragedy Alceste has prepared for himself, at least if Cavell is right that he is a *semblable* of Othello, another narcissist of sorts who demands that a woman find the whole world in him, who demands an intimacy so exclusive that no other “claim or desire *could* be opposed, could conceivably count; as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him.”⁹ Call that the danger of (a certain kind of) companionship. The stakes are too high, the failure, if it comes, too awful a betrayal.

Cavell closes the essay with the following lines, which may seem as odd and as beautiful to you as they do to me:

Montaigne seems, if I understand you both, to share your view of the exclusiveness of friendship, hence to be another of the most private of men; and yet somehow he puts this together with sociability. He invented, in inventing the essay, an intimate discourse for addressing strangers. He calls those whom he addresses his “relatives and friends,” and so they are, after his discourse has made them so (which it does in part by showing its strangeness to them, hence their strangeness to him, so that they may understand that there is something yet for them to become familiar with). Isn’t this a staggering thing when we remember our fathers? We may have known them not to have had the education they provided for us, and sometimes felt their heartiness as well as their melancholy to be bullying, to run roughshod over our subtleties. But I can remember instances of my father in conversation with strangers—in a shop, a lobby, a train—animated, laughing, comparing notes, when the

charge of insincerity fell from my grasp and I would gaze at his behavior as at a mystery. How can he care enough what the other thinks to be provident of his good feeling, and yet not care so terribly as to become unable to provide it? What skill enables him to be the one that puts the other at ease? Where can he have acquired it? He knew no more about the other than the other knew about him. He seemed merely able to act on what nobody could fail to know, and to provide what nobody could fail to appreciate, even if in a given moment they could not return it. Call it sociability. At such a time I felt I would be happy to have my father as an acquaintance, to be treated by him to a serious regard, if somewhat external, for my comfort and opinion; to count not as an intimate but as an equal. The very need of formality, of ceremony, would all at once seem to me freeing, and for a while I glimpsed a splendor, a tenderness, in the idea of the sociable. (104–105)

What is going on here? How and why does *this* count as an ending to a letter to Alceste? How did we get from Alceste to the Vietnam War, when Cavell “was going around . . . subject to fits of hearing screams in my ears” (104), and from the student demonstrations to our fathers and their behavior with seat-mates on a train? What does Cavell know about Alceste’s or Molière’s fathers? Or about my father or yours? (We are meant to be included here.) Nothing at all. So what is he doing? To begin with, it is an invitation to us to see if our experience of our fathers or ourselves has anything in common with Cavell’s. If it does not, then it shows his strangeness to us, offers that strangeness to us as a gift, so that we may understand that there is yet something for us to become familiar with. If it does, then we are invited to appreciate our fathers in a way we perhaps had not done before, to see anew their strangeness, to look past their heartiness or their melancholy and to reconsider our subtleties. We are invited to question, reconsider, regret, and even be ashamed of our lack of sociability. We are given the opportunity to make that lack an epistemological problem, to ask how our attachment to exclusive friendships and our suspicion of sociability might be produced by a certain fear.¹⁰ And perhaps to hope that what you cannot do in a shop, a lobby, a train, you may do in a book and honor your father after all. Cavell is identifying himself with Montaigne and attempting, like Montaigne, to achieve in writing the same sociability his father achieves in spoken conversation. He is calling us, making us, his relatives and friends. That means that Cavell’s philosophy must meet the standard expressed in the claim that his father “knew no more about the other than the other knew about him. He seemed merely able to act on what nobody could fail to know.” So

Cavell rejects writing that “claims to be philosophical and also to know something others do not know.”¹¹

When Socrates learned that the Oracle had said no man is wiser than Socrates, he interpreted this to mean, we are told, that he knew that he did not know. And we are likely to take this as a bit of faded irony or as a stuffy humility. What I take Socrates to have seen is that, about the questions which were causing him wonder and hope and confusion and pain, he knew that he did not know what no man can know, and that any man could learn what he wanted to learn. No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man—unless *wanting* to know is a special position.¹²

All that is a way of saying that these paragraphs, and the whole essay, are a model of “ordinary language philosophy.”¹³ This is the risk, the astonishingly courageous vulnerability of Cavell’s writing: “The price of a certain writing is a demand for friendship.”¹⁴ The risk is taken in the hope that what appears as strangeness will not further our isolation but instead may turn out to be what Emerson called “rejected thoughts.”¹⁵ They are strange not because we have never met them, but because we have never acknowledged them, perhaps because afraid that would leave us alone, a fear that Cavell understands more than any philosopher since Emerson and Wittgenstein. Cavell and Emerson and Wittgenstein take the risk of abandoning their fear in the hope that we will be inspired by their example to do the same and thereby reward their gamble by giving them company.¹⁶ This final paragraph of the “Cover Letter” is, after all, an intimate “if somewhat external” moment. It is just that Cavell holds out for intimacy with all of us (and calls it philosophy). I suppose I should say “a sort of intimacy,” but that is obvious. And it is obvious not because it is clear that this isn’t “real” intimacy, but because intimacy only comes in sorts. Not realizing that is one of Alceste’s problems.

In these lines, sociability is identified with formality and ceremony, things that Alceste identifies with hypocrisy. It suggests that the issue of Alceste’s refusal of formality and ceremony, or his mistaking them for hypocrisy, might have to precede the question of consent to society. You have to earn the right to refuse consent. You must be sociable before you can be unsociable. Our fathers know something about others, even about strangers, which we don’t, or don’t acknowledge. It isn’t much; it is “no more about the other than the other knew about him. He seemed merely able to act on what nobody could fail to know, and to provide what nobody could fail to appreciate, even if in a given moment they could not return it.” That *nobody*, not Cavell and Alceste and you and I, could fail to know, which means that we must refuse to acknowledge that we know it, must refuse to act on what we know and to cover that refusal with

unknowing. But how? And why? At least in part because we fail to appreciate it when someone else's father is next to us on a train and provident of our good feeling and we are trying to read, say, Cavell. Thinking that Borges must have been lying, or already blind, when he said, "Give me five minutes of a man's life over all the books in the world."

Cavell wants to have it both ways. He also wants Alceste to want to have it both ways, hence Montaigne and the invitation to writing, the invitation of writing. This is, after all, a personal letter, one that "sees things together in a way that nothing else I have done quite manages" and, I think, asks us to read ordinary language philosophy, especially Cavell's work, as "an intimate discourse for addressing strangers." But there is also an argument here with Montaigne which, if missed, smoothes over the tension-laden terrain that Cavell is trying to traverse. In the letter, Cavell mentions Montaigne's horror at our capacity to be horrified by the human. Cavell had also picked this up in *Pursuits of Happiness*, where he summarizes a bit of Montaigne with the words, "Life is hard, but then let us not burden it further by choosing tragically to call it tragic where we are free to choose otherwise. I understand Montaigne's alternative to horror to be the achievement of what he calls at the end a gay and sociable wisdom."¹⁷ But here in the "Cover Letter," he adds the qualification: "The world during my lifetime rather shows that it is yet more horrible to lose this capacity for horror" (103). Montaigne's advice is to accept the world. Cavell's question for Montaigne, even as he is trying to win back Alceste, is, "To whom is the advice usable? And how do we understand why it cannot be taken by those in directest need of it? The urging of moderation is valuable only to the extent that it results from a knowledge of the human possibilities beyond its urging. Is Montaigne's attitude fully earned, itself without a tint of the wish for exemption from the human?"¹⁸ And now the wish for exemption is revealed as present not just in Alceste but in his opposite.

I have called this letter tension-laden. Maybe I should have said confusing or even contradictory. I suppose he knows that, and yet (one more tension), the final line of the essay is, "it is not as hard as some of my acquaintances make out to find where I am" (105). I read "acquaintances" as referring to those like Anthony Kenny who, in a review of *The Claim of Reason*, called it "a misshapen, undisciplined amalgam of ill-sorted parts. . . . [It] is a worthwhile book, but it could have been much better had it been pruned of dead-wood and over-exuberant foliage."¹⁹ Or Alasdair MacIntyre:

Cavell announces at the outset [of *The Claim of Reason*] that the importance of Wittgenstein's writing is that it "is not of a character that lends itself to professionalization": nonetheless, his own exegesis

of Wittgenstein is all too likely to produce the opposite impression. This is partly a matter of unfortunate lapses of style. The result of what may be an attempt to pin down every last detail of the argument is that all too often one cannot see the wood for the twigs.²⁰

I could go on culling various charges from the reviewers. Cavell's style is "self-indulgent" and "inexcusable." He abandons "reason for imagination, arguments for images." His endless qualifications and parentheses "do not refine but cancel. The reader feels not that his life is being restored but that Cavell is hiding." The prose, unlike "straight philosophy," is designed to remain immune to "the uncovering of fallacious arguments, unsupported premises, or inconsistent principles."²¹

Which is it? Is he too professional or too unprofessional? Is it too much argument or too little? Is he self-indulgent or is he hiding? (Are we sure we know the difference?) The answers, were they available, may not be as important as the simple fact that these reviewers find him unreadable. Such things have been said often enough. No criticism of Cavell is more common than complaints about his style. The sentences are too long and convoluted, the punctuation too unorthodox, the argument too meandering; he doesn't so much "pin down every last detail" as chase every last detail around trees and through creeks, constantly shifting direction when another detail catches his eye. He just doesn't sound like Rawls or Davidson or Quine or McDowell or even Derrida or Deleuze.

So it is not surprising that those who most admire Cavell do so for the same reasons that Kenny, MacIntyre, et al. do not. Michael Wood called *The Claim of Reason*

a powerful and beguiling work which manifestly reflects a man who is in love with thought; with the risks, and the sillinesses, and the joys of it. . . . I shall live happily for some time with the sound [which Wood describes as "intimate, murmuring"] of *The Claim of Reason*. The writing is remarkable here, the philosopher as novelist gives density of detail to fleshless old questions.²²

And Arthur Danto wrote of *Pursuits of Happiness*:

This is a voice like no other in philosophy, today or ever, and the only voice it resembles at all is fiction. . . . In the end I loved the book, loved the author, felt, as with few authors I have read, that I was involved in a relationship something like the one of the couples in the films I still cannot take as seriously as he: as if the experience of reading the book confirms its thought.²³

It will be obvious that I side with Wood and Danto here, that I have no wish to distinguish how he says from what he says, that I find the *sound* of Cavell's voice irresistible, indispensable, and that "in philosophy it is the sound which makes all the difference."²⁴ I highlight two things from Wood and Danto. First, "the philosopher as novelist" and "the only voice it resembles at all is fiction." For a great many philosophers, like the reviewers mentioned prior to Wood and Danto, there is little reason to consider this anything but an insult. For others, like Cavell, that will be symptomatic of philosophy's and literature's mutual shunning of one another, which means it is about philosophy's and literature's self-perceptions. One reason Cavell writes as he does is to expose such perceptions, to keep alive the question of philosophy and literature's relationship. Not because he thinks, like Richard Rorty, that they should merge nor because he thinks their differences are unimportant, but because he thinks an appropriate account of their differences is, as yet, unknown.

Second, when Danto writes that "I was involved in a relationship something like the one of the couples in the films," he is referring to the couples of what Cavell calls "the comedies of remarriage." They are involved in relationships of comic repetition. A repetition engendered by the acknowledgment of the partner's separateness, by a refusal to ever say "I know all or enough of you." It is a joyful and difficult repetition, a continual turning back to the other. It is an attraction, a state of being mutually drawn toward each other repeatedly because each is found to be complex enough, mysterious enough, to be given time. Cavell, in one of those remarks he is always making about someone else but which applies to himself, wrote, "I do not mean to deny [Wittgenstein's] awful obscurities in [his remarks about the inner life] (which perhaps are not willful, but a true expression of their difficulties, philosophical and practical)."²⁵ That Danto finds this in the eccentric prose of this particular writer "as with few authors I have read" is not accidental. Erich Heller once wrote that, with most great philosophers (his example is Kant), studying them is like climbing a mountain. It takes enormous amounts of energy, but with time and diligence you can say you have reached the top and gained its panoramic view. But with Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, or Pascal and Kierkegaard, it is less like climbing a mountain and more like getting to know a city. There are always alleys and byways, cafes and bars, bookshops and libraries, parks and gardens you have not yet discovered. "Do you know Rome?" means something very different than "Have you been to the summit of Mont Blanc?"²⁶

Heller's Rome, like the couples in the remarriage comedies, and like Montaigne and his readers, remains capable of combining intimacy with surprise, familiarity with strangeness. Our relatives and friends must remain strange to us. We must allow them to remain strange, must invite them to

reveal their strangeness to us, must continually acknowledge that there is yet something for us to become familiar with.²⁷ That, I think Cavell would say, is a necessary condition of any friendship, not just marriage. But the claim at the end of the “Cover Letter” is also that it is a necessary condition for philosophical writing, which manifests itself as a refusal to assume too much about your audience.

We are now surrounded by misanthropic and self-anointed prophets. What was once the province of a few lonely souls like *Alceste* is now commonplace. We are told that it is “tediously obvious” that we are “sentimental barbarians”;²⁸ that the church “promotes a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity”;²⁹ that “we are already in a state so disastrous that there are no large remedies for it.”³⁰ We have been told this so many times that we know denying it is barbarian. But we don’t know why affirming it isn’t also barbarian, like Lear’s sermon in his madness, “When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools” (IV.vi.184–185), thereby declaring himself a fool, which we already knew. Is it because Lear sees the world as a stage that he sees everyone as fools, or is it because he sees everyone as fools that he sees the world as a stage? Once everyone is a fool, you must turn the world into a stage. That is, you must theatricalize all others, avoiding them, refusing to put yourself in their presence, refusing to allow them any voice which might destabilize the script. It is a common enough feeling. Emerson was well acquainted with it in himself and so fought it every step of the way with his chilling version of Pascal’s wager. “Let us treat the men and women well, treat them as if they were real. Perhaps they are.”³¹

But Lear and *Alceste* are exiles, and now our prophets are no longer exiled or no longer go into exile. Instead, they are perched on endowed chairs and we do not know if this is because they are not prophets at all, or because there is nowhere to go, no city outside this stage of fools or no one sane to guide us there. Like Socrates, we wonder if, or fear that, the only good city is the city of words. Unlike Socrates, we fear that the city is not shared, but is a private, personal fantasy.

For all the current talk of a theology that would reflect on practice, the truth is that we remain uncertain as to where today to locate true Christian practice. . . . In his or her uncertainty as to where to find this, the theologian feels almost that the entire ecclesial task falls on his own head. . . . Today it can feel as if it is up to the theologian alone (as in another sphere the artist, or the poet) who must perform this task of redeeming estrangement.³²

Cavell fears this too. “Philosophy, and serious writing generally, no longer knows to whom to direct its voice, no longer quite believes that a message in a bottle will find its way to another shore. Then it stands on darkening straits, casting unsystematic lines, in hopes of attracting to the surface some darting wish for sense. I am without the authority to excuse myself either for, or from, that position.”³³ The “serious writer” is here presented as an angler, fishing for companions as the daylight wanes and you can no longer see your fly on the water and have only the sound of the river and the fading hope that a fish will rise and a vague regret that your hobby isn’t golf. Casting lines, sixteen books, hoping to attract to the surface some darting wish for sense instead of endless criticisms of how unsystematic they are.

The difference is this. The loneliness of our self-anointed prophets is because they know everything there is to know about us; there is nothing left for them to know. For Cavell, everything is left to know; nothing is known, except what nobody could fail to know, which is no more than the other knows about us. The possibility of friendship.

Fathers and Daughters

In the previous pages, I suggested that ordinary language philosophy is a kind of writing that does not claim to know anything that others cannot know but commits itself to attentiveness to its companions. But a much fuller account of the ordinary will be necessary, because it remains one of the most confusing aspects of the legacy (Wittgenstein, Austin, Emerson, Thoreau) Cavell inherits. A frequent assumption is that the ordinary refers to a widely held set of beliefs and so means something like common sense or conventional wisdom. Sometimes the ordinary is understood to refer to a particular kind of person, “the common man,” as opposed to the elites. Alternatively, the ordinary is often taken to mean certain words, or a way of using words that avoids specialized vocabulary or complex sentence structures.³⁴ Those are all misleading assumptions, but when we begin to move away from them there seems to be no way to pin down just what the ordinary is supposed to mean. On one hand, it can be used to mean almost anything. On the other, it is used to draw a line excluding something else. But what? In what follows, I suggest that the most helpful way to understand the ordinary is as an activity, not an object; a mode of attention, not an object of attention; a kind of relationship or conversation. I will try to disengage the ordinary from things like common sense or pop culture or convention but confess at the outset that my interest is less in arguing for the inadequacy of such understandings than in displaying Cavell’s understanding.

[Ordinary language] does not refer to particular words of wide use, nor to particular sorts of people. It reminds us that whatever words are said and meant are said and meant by particular people, and that to understand what they (the words) mean you must understand what they (whoever is using them) mean, and that sometimes people do not see what they mean, that usually they cannot say what they mean, that for various reasons they may not know what they mean, and that when they are forced to recognize this they feel they do not, and perhaps cannot mean anything, and they are struck dumb.³⁵

The ordinary is a commitment to a form of questioning, a mode of criticism, a way of doing philosophy, a way to think. I am led to such thoughts by the fact that the lines just quoted, the most succinct description Cavell ever gives of the ordinary, introduce his essay on *King Lear*, and therefore suggest that we will discover Cavell's ordinary by observing what he does in that essay. It is an essay on the ordinary not because *King Lear* is an ordinary play. To be sure, in some ways it can be called ordinary. Many of the denials and avoidances performed by its characters are pretty ordinary ways we all abuse each other (though the ultimate consequences of those denials in *Lear* are hardly ordinary). Some of its characters—Gloucester and Kent, for example—are ordinary people, not kings or princesses. In some ways, the play is extraordinary: because of the beauty of its language; because it is poetic, not ordinary language; because it is among the greatest dramas ever written; because horrifying acts of cruelty are displayed; because some of its characters are royalty. But none of those reasons, none of what makes *Lear* extraordinary, are excluded from the ordinary in Cavell's ordinary language philosophy. That is, kings and cruelty and pentameter still fall within the purview of this essay and hence within the purview of what Cavell means by the ordinary. It is an essay on the ordinary because it models what the ordinary language philosopher does, which is "remind us that whatever words are said and meant are said and meant by particular people, and that to understand what they (the words) mean you must understand what they (whoever is using them) mean."

This is not the place to go into detail about the essay's argument. I am only interested in saying enough to approach an understanding of what Cavell means by the ordinary. Cavell is at pains to counter two common themes in Shakespearean criticism, one having to do with Shakespearean criticism in general, and the other with *Lear* interpretation. The first is a curious conflict between character criticism and verbal analysis. A common way to summarize the history of Shakespearean criticism (and literary criticism in general) is to say that, at some point around the publication of Bradley's *Shakespearean*

Tragedy, the emphasis shifted from characters to language. It is a crude account if only because it is bizarre to see how Coleridge or Bradley, for example, could be interested in characters without being interested in the words those characters say. Or how Empson or Knight could be interested in words without being interested in the characters who say them. But it won't do to counter with the claim that the critics are interested in both, not only because characters and words are bound up with each other, but because they should all be interested in one thing: the plays themselves. Nevertheless, the assumption is there even if it may be crude with regard to the greatest readers: Coleridge, Bradley, Empson, Knight, and others. Some critics make generalizations about characters that a closer look at the words belies. And sometimes they find intricate verbal patterns from which they draw conclusions independent of the characters.

How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about specific characters is to care about the utterly specific words they say when and as they say them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them. Yet apparently both frequently happen. Evidently what is to be remembered here is difficult to remember, or difficult to do—like attending with utter specificity to the person now before you, or to yourself.³⁶

The critical treatment of the blinding of Gloucester will serve as an example of this as well as an example of the second theme that Cavell is concerned to contest: the sight imagery in the play. The dominant readings of sight imagery in *Lear* are examples of the emphasis on verbal analysis at the expense of character. For a long time, until Paul Alpers' study,³⁷ it was a commonplace of *Lear* criticism (especially among the New Critics) to say that the recurring references to sight and eyes in the play were to be understood as symbolic of moral insight, the perception of moral truths. This culminates in the blinding of Gloucester, which is read as a "gigantic symbol" and which begins a journey toward spiritual insight expressed most clearly with "I stumbled when I saw." Most critics have thought that the blinding of Gloucester needed to be dramatically justified, that it would simply be gratuitous melodrama without some justification. The sight pattern justified it by placing it at the center of its symbolic field. As a symbol of insight, it shows us how those who can see are often morally lost, but "those who have lost their eyes may, in the very moment of losing them, receive a flash of moral illumination."³⁸ But when Alpers goes back to the play, he finds that all the references to sight "insist upon ordinary, literal uses of the eyes,"³⁹ most important, the recognition of others. Gloucester's "flash of

moral illumination" (that Edgar is innocent) is because Regan told him Edmund betrayed him, not because of some sort of internal illumination. Moreover, what we need to know, if the dominant reading is correct, is how Gloucester's lines confessing that he was wrong about Edgar get to be called "moral insight," but his speech immediately preceding his blinding, in which he rebukes Regan, is not moral insight. If his blinding has given him some special access to moral truths, how shall we describe the truths he declares to Regan?

How then is the blinding of Gloucester justified if not by its moral symbolism?³ Alpers' suggestion is that an attack on the eyes, among the most vulnerable of human organs, best dramatizes the human capacity for cruelty. Cavell departs from Alpers here and simply goes back to the text and reads it to us.

GLOUCESTER ... but I shall see
The winged vengeance overtake such
Children.

CORNWALL See't shalt thou never.
(III.vii.64–66)

At which point, Cornwall puts out one of Gloucester's eyes. A servant then intervenes but is stabbed from behind by Regan.

FIRST SERVANT O! I am slain. My Lord, you have one eye left
To see some mischief on him. Oh!

CORNWALL Lest it see more, prevent it. Out vile jelly!
(III.vii.80–82)

Cornwall has told us why he is blinding Gloucester. Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's eyes to prevent Gloucester from seeing him. There is symbolism here, "but what it symbolizes is a function of what it means... what this particular act of cruelty means is that cruelty cannot bear to be seen. It literalizes evil's ancient love of darkness."⁴⁰ All you have to do to see what Cavell sees here is pay attention to the words and have some understanding of the characters voicing those words. Cavell goes on: "This relates the blinding to Cornwall's needs; but it is also related to the necessities of Gloucester's character."⁴¹ Gloucester opens the play by revealing to Kent his shame that he has a bastard son. It is central to Gloucester's character that he is ashamed.⁴² "Shame is the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being looked at,"⁴³ and so the impulse is to avoid being seen. (In the opening scene, Gloucester's way of doing this is through joking about it, a common enough way for anybody.) And so Cavell offers his answer to a perennial question of *Lear* criticism: how is the blinding of Gloucester dramatically justified?

Gloucester suffers the same punishment he inflicts: In his respectability he avoided eyes; when respectability falls away and the disreputable come into power, his eyes are avoided. In the fear of Gloucester's poor eyes there is the promise that cruelty can be overcome, and instruction about how it can be overcome. That is the content which justifies the scene of his blinding, aesthetically, psychologically, morally.⁴⁴

It is not necessary at this point that you agree with Cavell's reading of Gloucester's blinding. I am only trying to show how Cavell's reading tries to place words and experiences in "alignment with human beings in particular circumstances who can be imagined to be having those experiences and saying and meaning those words."⁴⁵ The power of Cavell's reading comes from the entire nest of avoidances he identifies in the play, each of which feeds off the others, and of which I have described only one. Among the others are Lear's initial avoidance of Gloucester's recognition when he meets him in act IV, cruelly "picking at Gloucester's eyes, as if to make sure they are really gone"⁴⁶ before he will allow himself to be recognized; Edgar/Tom's refusal to reveal his identity to his father ("Until some half-hour past, when I was arm'd"; V.iii.193); Lear's avoidance of Goneril and Regan at the end when Cordelia asks, "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" and Lear responds, "No, no, no, no!" preferring instead, another avoidance, to go to prison with Cordelia as "God's spies."⁴⁷ He is still avoiding her a few lines later when he says, "Wipe thine eyes," assuming that she is weeping for the same reasons he would—for how far the mighty have fallen—and he cannot see that she weeps for him, for the way he is still avoiding her and himself.⁴⁸

Then comes the crucial move in the essay. Cavell's reading of the play has only pointed out the obvious. You don't have to be a Shakespeare scholar, trained in Elizabethan literature, to see it. (By now, Cavell has become one of our great readers of Shakespeare, but this essay, published in 1969, was his first venture into Shakespearean criticism.) Everything he has said is right before the reader's eyes. But then, if his reading is plausible, how can everyone from Coleridge to Empson have missed it? His answer is that it has not been missed so much as avoided. That is, the great genius of this play is the way it is able to implicate us in its mechanisms of avoidance. "In failing to see what the true position of a character is, in a given moment, we are exactly put in his condition, and thereby implicated in the tragedy."⁴⁹ When we, as viewers or readers of *Lear*, fail to see that Lear keeps avoiding Cordelia right up until the end, we also avoid Cordelia. When we fail to see that Edgar's failure to reveal himself to his father—who has said, "Might I but live to see [Edgar] in my

touch, / I'd say I had eyes again" (IV.i.22–23)—partakes of the same cruelty as that of Cornwall, we avoid Gloucester. When we reduce the blinding of Gloucester to a symbol, we sidestep Gloucester in the name of a higher truth, one made available by avoiding him, one whose availability demands avoiding him.⁵⁰ When we say that the abdication scene strains belief, we forget “the quick routes taken in one’s own rages and jealousies and brutalities,”⁵¹ or we forget that Lear’s conduct “is in fact, quite ordinary. A parent is bribing love out of his children . . . [and] wants exactly what a bribe can buy: (1) false love and (2) a public expression of love. That is, he wants something he does not have to return in *kind*.”⁵² Such is the genius of this particular drama. It sucks us into its hellish vortex. In doing so, it raises the (avoidable) suggestion that, if we are avoiding these characters, we are likely avoiding each other.

In terms which have so far come out, we can say: We must learn to reveal ourselves, to allow ourselves to be seen. When we do not, when we keep ourselves in the dark, the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him. There is fictional existence with a vengeance, and there is the theatricality which theater such as *King Lear* must overcome, is meant to overcome, shows the tragedy in failing to overcome. The conditions of theater literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside—hiddenness, silence, isolation—hence make that existence plain. Theater does not expect us to simply stop theatricalizing; it knows that we can theatricalize its conditions as we can theatricalize any others. But in giving us a place within which our hiddenness and silence and separation are accounted for, it gives us a chance to stop.⁵³

It gives us a chance to stop avoiding each other. But that does not mean it gives us a chance to overcome our separateness. That would just be another way of avoiding presentness. It gives us a chance to acknowledge our separateness. “Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine and the other is yours.”⁵⁴ It gives us a chance to acknowledge our responsibility for our separateness. It lets me allow you to be other, and so to face you, to make myself present, to be in your presence. This is what Cavell means by the ordinary. In his hands, it is inextricably entwined with presentness (the opposite of theatricalization). It is a kind of attentiveness. Cavell defends the Annales school of French historians with their (particular) emphasis on social history.⁵⁵ Cavell affirms Emerson’s celebration of the simple things of everyday life in distinction to “the great, the remote, the romantic.”⁵⁶ Cavell celebrates the films of 1930s and ’40s pop culture. But the argument I am trying to make is that the

ordinary is less about the object of attention than it is about the mode of attention.

A failure so to perceive, to persist in missing the subject, which may amount to missing the evanescence of the subject, is ascribable only to ourselves, to failures of our character; as if to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things—that is, to fail the perception that there *is* something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong—requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves.⁵⁷

The ordinary is not first about the common, familiar, and low. It is first about presentness. The common, familiar, and low figure prominently, but derivatively, because they are among the things it is hardest for us, or for philosophers, to be present to, and so the call for attentiveness is especially necessary here.⁵⁸ But that doesn't mean that Cavell's ordinary excuses us from the same rigorous presentness to the "extraordinary" or the "philosophical."⁵⁹ Cavell's ordinary calls us to the things we are most prone to avoid, and often this will be something like the common.

One final point, that may so far have been obscured: it is rarely clear just what is ordinary and what is philosophical. Cavell says that he read Augustine's *Confessions* before he read *Philosophical Investigations* and while he noticed much of philosophical interest in it, he never stopped to consider Augustine's remarks about infant language learning as philosophically interesting.⁶⁰ In other words, when he first read the lines that Wittgenstein uses to begin the *Investigations*, he thought them to be ordinary. Wittgenstein reveals them to be philosophical. Discovering that requires a particular kind of attentiveness, "awake when all others have fallen asleep." Similarly with Cavell's insistence that we "mean what we say." It would be a grave misunderstanding to think that this is something readily available. The problem is that "[s]ometimes people do not see what they mean, that usually they cannot say what they mean, that for various reasons they may not know what they mean, and that when they are forced to recognize this they feel they do not, and perhaps cannot mean anything, and they are struck dumb." The injunction to mean what we say is an injunction to find out what we are saying means.⁶¹

Husbands and Wives

Was I born to become
a ritual mourner?

I want to sing of festivities,
 The greenwood into which Shakespeare
 Often took me.⁶²

What has made the invention or reinvention of marriage necessary? When I can motivate that question with sufficient philosophical perspicuousness, it should become the question What has caused the radicalization of the threat of skepticism, such that a ceremony of single intimacy is what we have to oppose to the threatened withdrawal of the world...?⁶³

The Claim of Reason ends with the image of Othello's and Desdemona's dead bodies lying together on their wedding sheets "knowing they are 'gone to burning hell,' she with a lie on her lips...he with her blood on him." The reader closes the book wondering where to go next. One honorable and very American response to tragedy would find Cavell following Alceste. Huck Finn lights out for the territories alone after he is brought face to face with American absurdities. Shane rides off into the darkness after his attempt to rejoin civilization collapses, his loneliness underlined by the pursuing child calling after him. He is pushed out, reminded that there is nothing for him but withdrawal. Philip Marlowe and Lew Archer, one expects, have merely stayed out.⁶⁴ But we do not blame them. Their America, which is called "California," unlike Shane's, is uninhabitable. Philip Roth's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, lives alone like a hermit because, he says, it is the only way "to keep the shit at bay."⁶⁵

Against such a background, we can see the importance of Cavell's choice to turn from here to comedy. *Pursuits of Happiness*, his study of film comedy, is the first book Cavell wrote after *The Claim of Reason*. Read together, it is as if Cavell, reeling from *Othello*, was forced to embark on a journey out from where his investigations of tragedy had left him, was forced to allow Howard Hawks, Preston Sturges, and George Cukor to take him to the greenwood of "Connecticut." If it is true that "tragedy is the working out of a response to skepticism...that tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of,"⁶⁶ then there is reason to explore the possibility that comedy is an interpretation of the ordinary. "Some image of marriage, as an interpretation of domestication, in these writers [Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Hawthorne.] is the fictional equivalent of what these philosophers understand to be the ordinary."⁶⁷ Not that the ordinary is the place where skepticism cannot take hold but that it is a place where skepticism is produced and confronted in a manner that is comic, not tragic; where it ends in marriage, not murder, forgiveness, not vengeance. And now it can seem that the appeal to the ordinary then becomes allied with a certain kind of appeal to pop culture, especially since

Cavell's most extensive work on this theme occurs in a book on 1930s and '40s Hollywood films. It sounds like a new way of cordoning off the "data" it can appeal to. In what follows, I will expand the argument of the last section (that the ordinary is about a mode of attention, not the object of attention) to show that Cavell's interest in the domestic is a manifestation of his interest in acknowledgment and conversation. When Cavell identifies the domestic—marriage—with the ordinary, he means that marriage, as presented in these films (which Cavell reads as allegorical of Aristotelian friendship), is a place where two people are *present* to each other. "Pervading each moment of the texture and mood of remarriage comedy is the mode of *conversation* that binds or sweeps together the principal pair. I suppose this is the feature which comes in for the greatest conceptual development in *Pursuits of Happiness*."⁶⁸ Marriage, as these comedies understand it, is a mode of conversation. It is a mode in which the avoidances, denials, and theatricalizations of tragedy and melodrama emerge but are overcome in what Milton called "a meet and happy conversation." The ordinariness of what Cavell is calling the domestic, then, is not because these films are pop culture or about regular folks, but because of the kind of conversation achieved between two people.

Cavell understands these comedies to be inheritors of Shakespeare's comedies, and one of the things that interests him is "why it was only in 1934, and in America of all places, that the Shakespearean structure surfaced again" after its long absence.⁶⁹ His answer notes the conjunction in the 1930s of a particular stage of feminism and at the same time the availability of actresses as remarkable as Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, and Irene Dunne, among others. But what interests him most are the crucially important ways these comedies transform the Shakespearean structure and what that can tell us about marriage and society.

The comedies show marriage to be a perpetual willingness for remarriage, to be persistence amid disappointment, to include the ability to understand disappointment as opportunity. That is a first difference with Shakespearean comedy. There, certain obstacles stand in the way of the couple's coming together, and they must be overcome for the marriage to occur. But in the comedies of remarriage, as the name suggests, the couple has to be brought together *again*. They are commonly the story of a couple, much older than the couples of Shakespearean comedy, for whom the layers of misunderstanding have led them to divorce or the brink of divorce, and they must find their way back to friendship with each other and replace a desire for vengeance with forgiveness. The obstacles are not to a particular marriage (to the occasion of a wedding) but to the endurance of marriage. The obstacle is marriage itself, whether it is still legitimate, and the end is the transformation of marriage, which shows it to be

(a constant willingness for) remarriage, a perpetual readiness for the acknowledgment of the partner and a perpetual demand for acknowledgment. By the end of these films, “[w]e feel that these people know each other, or risk being known.”⁷⁰ In doing so, these films show marriage to be an “emblem of the knowledge of others.”⁷¹ In doing so, the comedy also

invokes the fantasy of the perfected human community, proposes marriage as our best emblem of this eventual community—not marriage as it is but as it may be—while at the same time it grants . . . that we cannot know that we are humanly capable of achieving that eventuality, or of so much as achieving a marriage that emblemizes it, since that may itself be achievable only as part of the eventual community.⁷²

In these comedies, “a criterion is being proposed for the success or happiness of a society, namely that it is happy to the extent that it provides conditions that permit conversations of this character, or a moral equivalent of them, between its citizens.” (The third chapter of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* criticizes John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* for actively refusing such conversations.)⁷³ This brings us to another crucial difference between these comedies and the Shakespearean comedies that they lean on and brings us to the place where the important parallel with the end of *Nicomachean Ethics* becomes clearest.⁷⁴ In classical comedy, the reconciliation of the individuals is also a wider reconciliation of the community. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, the events that lead to the (double) wedding are the same that lead to the averting of certain bloodshed. In the (quadruple) wedding which ends *As You Like It*, the rifts between the Duke and his brother and between Orlando and his brother are also healed. (The multiple weddings—also in *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, etc.—reinforce the point as they “suggest also the wholesale pairing off that takes place in a dance” and the entire community is drawn into the conjugal joy.)⁷⁵ But in the comedy of remarriage, the reconciliation is no wider than the couple. This, Cavell suggests, is why these films so rarely end with a wedding. In the absence of festival, the couple must turn to festivity, which, according to Cavell, is what Luther was suggesting when he said, “All of life is baptism.”⁷⁶ But Luther did not expect that festivity to be “un-sponsored, alone,” and so these comedies are also a criticism of a society in which a “meet and happy conversation” between these couples must be conducted without its ratification, and in which such conversation is rarely, if ever, conducted among its citizens.

One final difference between the comedies of remarriage and classical comedy: in a Shakespearean comedy, the obstacle to be overcome is a lack of knowledge on the part of the characters. The hero must learn that this man is

really the woman he loves (*As You Like It*) or that this man he loves is really a woman (*Twelfth Night*), or the heroine must learn who her real parents are (*The Winter's Tale*). It is a complication overcome by a piece of information. Furthermore, that information is known to the audience. But in the remarriage comedies, no such piece of information will accomplish the resolution. These characters "have something to learn but it cannot come as news from others,"⁷⁷ and we as audience cannot know what it will be until they show it to us (which, for some, like Nietzsche, is why there can be no tragedy and no comedy, since there are no longer such keys to our identity).⁷⁸ In these comedies, it is not a matter of learning a hitherto unknown fact nor of "the reception of new experience but a matter of a new reception of your own experience."⁷⁹

All they have to go on is themselves and the hope that selves can change. But that is all we have ever had. The ordinary is the place where you step forward into that knowledge, where you take, or are given, space to do so without fear, or at least without paralyzing fear. And so the stakes of these comedies are raised. In what does the legitimacy of marriage consist? On what is its legitimacy founded?

It is part of our understanding of our world . . . that Luther redefined the world in getting married, and Henry the Eighth . . . in getting divorced. It has since then been a more or less open secret in our world that we do not know what legitimizes either divorce or marriage.⁸⁰

The overarching question of the comedies of remarriage is precisely the question of what constitutes a union, what makes these two into one, what binds, you may say what sanctifies in marriage. When is marriage an honorable estate? In raising this question these films imply not only that the church has lost its power over this authentication but that society as a whole cannot be granted it. In thus questioning the legitimacy of marriage, the question of the legitimacy of society is simultaneously raised, even allegorized.⁸¹

The remarriage comedies place a question mark over society. On one hand, the plain fact that they (the marriages) exist suggests that "in all fragility, we have it attested that our intelligibility to one another is so far a match for the heydays of chaos reaching our ears."⁸² On the other, they reveal a society that leaves only grudging room for companionship, and none for community.⁸³ Such judgment reaches a peak in the companion genre to the remarriage comedies: the melodrama of the unknown woman.

Both genres tell stories of "perfectionist" women demanding to be known, in pursuit of a further self, on a journey from conformity to self-reliance. In the

comedies, marriage provides a mutual exemplarity that enables the attainment of a further self. But in the comedies, the weight of exemplarity is off balance, revealing a “taint of villainy in men”⁸⁴ which becomes explicit in the melodramas. The women of the melodramas are women whose new creation cannot happen through marriage, women for whom marriage could only be conformity. They are women who have the courage to acknowledge that. They have overcome the terror of absolute expressiveness. “The wish, in the great stars [for perfect personal expressiveness] is a function not of their beauty, such as that may be, but of their power of privacy, of knowing unknownness. It is a democratic claim for personal freedom.”⁸⁵ They have accepted privacy, not as the withholding of secrets, but as the acknowledgment of separateness and finitude.

Here is where male villainy emerges. In the remarriage comedies, it is the woman who is in need of an education. The man has to find it in him to provide it and the woman to accept it from him. In the melodramas, a reversal occurs in which “her (superior, exterior) knowledge becomes the object—as prize or as victim—of the man’s fantasy, who seeks to share its secrets (*Now, Voyager*), to be ratified by it (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*), to escape it (*Stella Dallas*), or to destroy it (*Gaslight*).”⁸⁶

But while the unknown women are, to a significant degree, victims of patriarchy, it would be misleading to leave it at that. The failure of the men in their lives to acknowledge them should also be understood as the way the expressiveness of these women demands a commensurate acknowledgment. Their expressiveness outstrips the men’s capacity for acknowledgment.⁸⁷

Widows (“Are they *my* poor?”)

As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

This looks like two little stories: one a condemnation of the scribes and another a recommendation of the widow's offering, of her self-sacrifice, her generosity in contrast to the greed of the scribes. But it may be just as helpful to read the account of the widow as a continuation of the condemnation of the scribes, an illustration of how the scribes "devour widows' houses." They aren't bullies. They aren't landlords evicting the widows. They aren't bankers initiating foreclosure proceedings. But, then, how do they devour widows' houses? How are they devouring this woman's house? She gives her penny, all she has, her whole living, from her own free will; no one is twisting her arm. The scribes aren't standing over her shoulder, making sure she doesn't hold back. And why would they for a penny?

I am not exactly sure how to answer or negotiate those questions. But I have an idea how Karl Marx would have answered them and so, to begin with, I offer what seems to me the most obvious reading of this story, a Marxist reading, and I hope that you will be patient with me.⁸⁸ By invoking Marx, I don't mean that this is about what liberation theologians have called "the preferential option for the poor." I mean that this woman is a victim of what Marxists call "false consciousness," that category which is supposed to account for the docility of the underclasses. Marx needed an explanation for why the great majority of the working classes not only did not rise up and overthrow the ruling class, but also actively supported it, an explanation for why they actually participated in their own oppression. This could only be because the poor were not conscious, or were falsely conscious, of the ways in which the system was against them. False consciousness is the oppressors' ideology when it has taken root in the minds and hearts of the oppressed. It shows just how powerful the oppressors are. Not only are they in control over what the poor do; they control how they think and feel. The chains which Marx called for the workers to throw off were not just laws; they were habits of thinking, patterns of being. And, as everyone knows, Marx understood that religion was a very useful tool in achieving such control over how the poor think and feel, for inculcating those habits of thinking—"the sigh of the oppressed, the opiate of the people." And isn't this how religion functions for this widow? Years of listening to the scribes have brainwashed her into sacrificing her whole life to this dying institution that "devours widows' houses." She gives her penny and trudges home to die alone, confident that she has done the right thing. And we share her confidence when we affirm this deed as a model of discipleship, of self-sacrifice and generosity. (Except, we share it from a position closer to that of the scribes.)

False consciousness is the reason that education was—is—so central to any revolutionary vision. And in this passage, we have a standard example of Jesus as teacher. His remarks about the widow begin with "he called his disci-

ples and said to them.” This is a moment in *their* education. Not just a moment, but the opening of an entire chapter of Jesus educating the twelve. The public ministry of Jesus, which reaches its height immediately prior to this, ends here. From now on, it is, for the most part, just him and his disciples. The crowds disappear from view. Jesus watches the widow give her offering and goes on to say, just two verses later, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” We are left to think: that poor silly old woman. Not only did she give all, she gave it all for nothing. It would be different if, like Zaccheus did or like the rich young ruler was supposed to do, she gave to the poor. But now I sound like those who, a chapter later, scold the woman who anoints Jesus with “an alabaster jar of very costly ointment”: “This ointment could have been sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor.” Jesus rebukes them, saying, “She has done a good service for me. The poor you will always have with you . . . but you will not always have me.” But then I think: it would have been different if the widow had given her penny to Jesus and the disciples as this woman gave her offering to Jesus instead of to the temple. Or I think: it would have been different if, like the widow Ruth, she was doing it for someone, for Naomi, whom she loves. Or if, like the widow of Zarephath, she was giving it to Elijah. It just doesn’t seem like there is any justification for the widow’s action. Jesus never says it is a good thing. He says she gave more than they; she gave all.

Perhaps you are uncomfortable with the way I have chosen to read this passage through Marxist lenses. Perhaps because it is too strange and unfamiliar a reading. Perhaps because we are, as seems pretty reasonable, suspicious of Marxism. Perhaps because we are, properly, suspicious of any time alien theories are allowed to determine, or overdetermine, the reading of scripture. Perhaps we, like many nowadays, think the very idea of false consciousness is a bad one. And it is a bad idea for a number of reasons of which I will mention only one: it makes the theorist too smart and the poor, those who are being theorized for, too dumb. (It would not hurt my intuitions here to say that it makes the theorist too much like a scribe.) The widow becomes the gullible fool, blinded by a cloud of unknowing which the middle-class revolutionary is somehow able to see through. Her voice doesn’t matter because we already know the right answer, the right revolutionary theory, before we ask her. The Hebrew word for widow literally means “the silent one.” The Marxist reading keeps her silent.

But we had better be a bit uncomfortable with that as well. To say why, I want to suggest that a likely contemporary analogy for this widow’s misguided piety, her support of the system that is devouring her, is the GIs in Iraq. Those from economically deprived families and towns who, because they had so few

options, were persuaded by the army recruiter when he came to their high school and now are and are now serving, sometimes dying, in Iraq and Afghanistan. At one of the antiwar rallies in early 2003, a Vietnam veteran said, "The Pentagon supports our troops the way agribusiness supports hogs."

But to turn around and offer the standard reading may run the same risk of silencing the widow. The fact is, we just don't know why she does what she does or even *what* she does, that is, what she understands herself to be doing. For all we know, she is just a silly old woman. Or for all we know, she is like the old women I used to see in Ethiopia, gathered outside the church on Good Friday, prostrating themselves before the church hundreds of times. These are women in their old age who have been fasting all week. They have borne eight or ten children, cooked over fires, washed clothes without running water all their lives. Why would they torture their bodies like that outside churches with icons of the emperor holding a machine gun? Or, for all we know, her sacrifice is an act of protest, like one of those self-immolating Buddhist monks back in Vietnam.

How will we find out? How will we be able to hear this woman? How will we put ourselves in her presence? And now it occurs to me that one of the most interesting aspects of the passage is the simple fact that Jesus even notices her. In the bustling crowd of people, Jesus' eye picks out the widow. Do we also notice her? Of course, we have seen her: on our own streets, the "single mother," object of so much self-satisfied middle-class contempt. We have seen her on TV, her bent back covered in rags, her thin arms holding a shivering child to her breast. She has walked hundreds of miles barefoot from Rwanda to the Congo, from the Sudan to Eritrea, in those pictures that back in the 1980s and '90s some Mennonite Central Committee workers used to call "famine porn." Porn because offered up to our objectifying gaze. They aren't real people, aren't real to us.

Emerson hated this sort of thing. He wrote, notoriously:

Do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; the thousandfold Relief Societies;—though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is

a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.⁸⁹

Emerson is despised for writing such things, which are designed to make even the most tolerant, happy liberal have a conniption. And so he is read most commonly as a teacher of selfishness. The reading goes something like this: Emerson perceives an American society pervaded by what he usually calls conformity, sometimes timidity or fear. It is a conformity which undergirds slavery, capitalism, and the dispossession of the indigenous peoples; a timidity which has prevented the American scholar from making any contribution to literature; a fear which has trapped Americans in a “silent melancholy,” or what Thoreau called “quiet desperation.” As an antidote to this conformity, Emerson suggests “self-reliance,” a radical individualism, which breaks from history and from the herd and its authority, indeed from all authority except the authority of the self. It turns out that Emerson was right about conformity, but his solution backfires. No individual, however self-reliant, is able to withstand the pressures of capitalist society. Capitalism was and is all about the creation of individuals and so Emerson’s solution unwittingly colludes, becomes a battering ram against an open door. His individuals are at best helpless dupes of liberal capitalism, at worst, agents of positive harm, far worse than the New England herds. John Updike, who despises him, says that Emerson taught a “doctrine of righteous selfishness.” Harold Bloom, who loves him, admits that it isn’t exactly Reaganism but “self-reliance translated out of the inner life and into the marketplace is difficult to distinguish from our current religion of selfishness.” That is, like too many of our contemporaries, “Emerson is more than prepared to give up on the great masses that constitute mankind.” Such is “the American religion [Emerson] founded.”⁹⁰ This is all very bad.

You could stop here and rest with Updike and Bloom, confident that there is nothing here worth responding to in any manner except indignation. But is there anything unique here? We can find examples of Emerson’s sentiments in widely varied sources. Abbie Hoffman, for instance, tells of his mother’s exhortation to eat all the food on his plate because of “the poor children in Africa who would be happy to have it.” To which he responded, “Ma, name one.” The “good man” and the “popular charities” refer to the sort of people and causes that, say, Dickens was always making fun of. Like Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, they commit their lives to saving Africa but remain completely blind to the poor in the streets of London and even to their own children.⁹¹ Philanthropy, wrote Karl Barth, is the refuge of “the man who at bottom has no more time for his fellow man than he has for God, who refuses to consider him.” Philanthropy

enables him to not “have to confess this either to himself or to God.” It is a cloak for the “concealment of inhumanity.”⁹²

Emerson knows that the reason it is a wicked dollar which should be withheld is because he gives that dollar for the same reason I do. To get out from under the gaze. And so sometimes, too, I hear Emerson as a voice of bitter anger, and want to say that only someone who has felt the gaze of the poor, understood their demand, could react with such flippancy or vehemence. And those happy liberals who despise that line are the ones who can either ignore the beggars with aplomb or think a dime is supererogatory (or both). I am haunted by his question: “Are they *my* poor?” Every time I give beggars money, not to be nice, not to help out, but simply to get out from under their gaze, I think with Emerson: “Are they *my* poor?” Well, are they? Are they yours? (Are they John Updike’s? Are rural Indian women really Martha Nussbaum’s poor?) I mean, how would I know that they are yours? How have I seen you make them yours? Or, how have we let them make us theirs?