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Introduction to the French edition of *Must We Mean What We Say?*

Sandra Laugier

Translated by Daniela Ginsburg

Must We Mean What We Say? is Stanley Cavell's first book, and, in a sense, it is his most important.¹ It contains all the themes that Cavell continues to develop masterfully throughout his philosophy. There is a renewed usage of J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, and, in the classic essay "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," he establishes the foundations of a radical reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein (later taken up in *The Claim of Reason*), the connections among skepticism, acknowledgement, and Shakespearean tragedy (which one finds in *Disowning Knowledge* and, in a positive form, in *Pursuits of Happiness*); there is the reflection on the ordinary that runs throughout his later works (*In Quest of the Ordinary* and *A Pitch of Philosophy*); and, finally, there is the original aesthetic approach that defines Cavell's work, through his objects—which range from William Shakespeare to Samuel Beckett and pass through Hollywood comedies and melodrama, and opera—and, above all, through his style and method.²

The following essay is the introduction to *Dire et vouloir dire: Livre d'essais*, trans. Sandra Laugier and Christian Fournier (Paris, 2009). This is the first translation into any language of Stanley Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, forty years after its publication.

1. See Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York, 1969); hereafter abbreviated MW.

2. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York, 1979), hereafter abbreviated CR, trans. under the title *Les Voix de la raison: Wittgenstein, le scepticisme, la moralité et la tragédie* by Sandra Laugier and Nicole Balso (Paris, 1996); *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (New York, 1987); *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), trans. under the title *A la recherche du bonheur, Hollywood et la comédie du remariage* by Laugier and Christian Fournier (Paris,

But this is not the reason for interest in this book—even if, as Cavell has remarked in his recent preface, one can retrospectively draw the essence of his work out of these first writings, which established his unique and inimitable voice. *Must We Mean What We Say?* is not only relevant as a seminal work; its particular importance lies in assembling themes that, simply by being brought together, by their internal articulations, constitute a radical, original problematic that is then thematically (and, in each case, brilliantly) developed. *Must We Mean What We Say?* is the only work of what is called contemporary thought to carry the project of ordinary language philosophy through to its end. This philosophy of language has little to do with what has been called linguistic philosophy, or with Oxford philosophy as a method of analysis, or with linguistics. It is a philosophy that goes back to Wittgenstein's first question in the *Blue Book* and to Austin's questions in his first essays: "What is the meaning of a word?" What is it to speak, and how to speak?³ What are the implications of this activity for the definition of the human? We still do not have answers to these questions, and thus *Must We Mean What We Say?* expresses one of the crucial stakes of contemporary philosophy.

Ordinary Language and Its Philosophy

When Cavell published what he deliberately called a "book of essays" in 1969, he knew he was upsetting a well-established American philosophical

1993); *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago, 1988); and *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), trans. under the title *Un Ton pour la philosophie* by Laugier and Elise Domenach (Paris, 2003).

3. J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford, 1961), p. 56; hereafter abbreviated *PP*. See also Austin, "How to Talk: Some Simple Ways," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 53 (1953): 227–46.

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tradition, which had emerged out of the arrival of Vienna Circle philosophers, epistemologists, and logicians fleeing Nazism onto the American philosophical scene.⁴ In *Must We Mean What We Say?* analytic philosophy was called into question for the first time in America, where it had become dominant over the course of the twentieth century, and the book proceeds from one of analytic philosophy's unassimilable, even repressed, elements: ordinary language philosophy, as represented by Austin and Wittgenstein. To take interest in our ordinary statements, in what we *say* and *mean* offends both "classical" philosophical tradition, which typically wants to go beyond ordinary meaning, and the analytic tradition, which wants to analyze and correct ordinary propositions. *Must We Mean What We Say?* has thus gained new relevance with the return of Austin to the fore of contemporary philosophy and with recent questionings of the efficacy of the analytic model and method.

The title essay, "Must We Mean What We Say?" which develops a theory of meaning in opposition to propositional sense and to psychological intention, as well as "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" are articles of historical importance, provoking discussion at the time of their publication and determining many current readings of Wittgenstein.⁵ The latter essay contains the seed of all of *The Claim of Reason* as well as the radicality and simplicity that constitutes Cavell's approach, which effects an important displacement: one must not only attend to analyzing the empirical content and logical structure of statements, one must also look to what we say—to *we* and to *say*. That is, we must ask ourselves what we do with our language, how what we do in a situation is part of what we say. *Must We Mean What We Say?* was the first work to ask—in various domains and by turning to unexpected resources, such as Beckett, Shakespeare, Søren Kierkegaard, or the discourse of musical critique—the question of the *relevance* of our statements (no longer the question of their meaning) as *relevance to ourselves*. The notion of relevance has since been absorbed into a mentalist philosophy of communication, but we must not let this prevent us from seeing the importance of the model that Cavell, with great fidelity to the Austinian model, proposes here. The central question of *Must We Mean What We Say?* is neither the question of propo-

4. For a historical perspective on this, see Laugier, *Recommencer la philosophie: La Philosophie américaine aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1999).

5. See Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), and Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, Wittgenstein* (Bloomington, Ind., 2008), *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), and "Rethinking Mathematical Necessity," in *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

sitions' objective, semantic, or empirical content nor that of their nonmeaning but of the fortunes and misfortunes of ordinary expression. The problem is no longer what propositions *mean* or even what they *do* but to *mean what one says*. Do we know what we mean? And *who* can know this?

Cavell takes a watchword from Wittgenstein to describe bringing words back from their metaphysical to their ordinary use: to bring them home.⁶ The return to ordinary use is critical. Cavell maintains in *Must We Mean What We Say?* that we know neither what we think nor what we mean and that the task of philosophy is to bring us back to ourselves, that is, to bring words back to their everyday use and to bring knowledge of the world back to knowledge or proximity of the self. The Cavellian "voice of the ordinary" takes its meaning in response to the risk of skepticism, that loss or distancing of the world, that failure of words that cinema also explores, as Cavell's work from the same period, *The World Viewed*, shows.⁷ The appeal to the ordinary and to our uses of words is not obvious; it is shot through with this skepticism, with what Cavell defines as the "uncanniness of the ordinary."⁸ Thus, the ordinary is neither the common sense philosophy sometimes claims for itself, nor does it have anything to do with a rationalized version of ordinary language philosophy in which ordinary language properly analyzed would be a trustworthy source of knowledge. The ordinary is lost or distant for both Austin and Wittgenstein.

Cavell's originality thus lies in defining the ordinary on the basis of ordinary language and the thought of the ordinary on the basis of the philosophy of ordinary language. It is Cavell's reading of Austin—the first to bring out Austin's realism—that makes such an approach possible. To talk about language is simply to talk about what language talks about, says Cavell: "The philosophy of ordinary language is not about language, anyway not in any sense in which it is not also about the world. Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about" (*MW*, p. 95). Examining ordinary language offers us a "sharpened perception of phenomena" (*PP*, p. 29). It is this sharpening of visual and auditory perception that Cavell seeks as early as *Must We Mean What We Say?* where what is at stake in ordinary language philosophy is, as he will later put it in *Pursuits of Happiness*, "the internality of words and world to one an-

6. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, ed. Hacker and Schulte (New York, 2009), §116, p. 53; hereafter abbreviated *PI*.

7. See Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York, 1971); trans. under the title *La Projection du monde* by Fournier (Paris, 1999).

8. See Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," *In Quest of the Ordinary*, pp. 153–78.

other.”⁹ This is an intimacy that cannot be demonstrated or posited by thesis but can only be brought out, as Austin does, by examining our uses and attending to the differences traced by language. In exploring the uses of words, Austin is searching for the natural, almost boring, relation between words and the world, and he is against arguments (even Wittgensteinian ones) that would validate this relation in terms of a structure common to language and the world: “If it is admitted (*if*) that the rather boring yet satisfactory relation between words and world which has here been discussed does genuinely occur, why should the phrase ‘is true’ not be our way of describing it?” (*PP*, p. 133). Austin makes the “examination of uses” a way to find the naturalness of the relationship between language and the world. For him, philosophers have failed to come to an agreement and have lost themselves in “senseless” discussions.¹⁰ Contrary to what is classically maintained, their problem is not agreeing on an opinion but on a point of departure, a *given*. This given is *language*—not as a body of statements or words but as agreement on *what we would say when*.

For me, it is essential at the beginning to come to an agreement on the question of “what we would say when.” To my mind, experience proves amply that we do come to agreement on “what we would say when” such or such a thing, though I grant you it is often long and difficult. No matter how long it may take, one can nevertheless succeed, and on the basis of this agreement, this given, this established knowledge, we can begin to clear our little part of the garden. I should add that too often this is what is missing in philosophy: a preliminary *datum* on which one might agree at the outset.¹¹

What we would or should say; what we would mean—the agreement is normative. It is possible because ordinary language “embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing and the connections they have found worth marking in the lifetimes of many generations” (*PP*, p. 182). This capacity to mark differences interests Cavell; in order for us to have something to say and mean, there must be differences that hook onto us and *are important* to us. “Further, the world must exhibit (we must observe) similarities and dissimilarities (there could not be the one without the other): if everything were either absolutely indistinguishable from anything else or completely unlike anything else, there would be nothing to say” (*PP*, p. 121). In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell follows the prin-

9. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 204.

10. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford, 1962), p. 5.

11. Austin, *La Philosophie analytique*, ed. Jean Wahl and Leslie Beck (Paris, 1962), p. 334.

ciple set forth by Austin in an enigmatic passage of “A Plea for Excuses” to its end:

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not *merely* at words (or ‘meanings’ whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. [*PP*, p. 182]

Austin’s realism consists in this conception of differences and resemblances (a theme he shares with Wittgenstein). In “Austin at Criticism,” Cavell insists on the real nature of distinctions in Austin, in contrast with the distinctions usually established by philosophers.¹²

Too obviously, Austin *is* continuously concerned to draw distinctions, and the finer the merrier, just as he often explains and justifies what he is doing by praising the virtues of natural distinctions over homemade ones. . . . And better not merely because finer, but because more solid, having, so to speak, a greater natural weight; appearing normal, even inevitable, when the others are luridly arbitrary; useful where the others seem twisted; real where the others are academic; fruitful where the others stop cold. [*MW*, pp. 102–3]

This kind of fine fit between language and the world will give us back the world—not the search for metaphysical adequacy. For Austin, “true” simply designates one of the possible ways of expressing the harmony between language and the world. “Fitting” for him designates a concept no longer of correspondence or even of correctness but rather the appropriateness of a statement within the circumstances, the fact that it is proper. “The statements fit the facts always more or less loosely, in different ways on different occasions” (*PP*, p. 130). Wittgenstein also has a say in formulating what has been Cavell’s obsession throughout his work: the search for the right, fitting [*juste*] tone¹³—conceptually, morally, and perceptually—that Cavell mentions in his first autobiographical essay with regard to his mother’s musical talent and his father’s jokes.¹⁴

It is a matter of finding a fine sensitivity to things and the fit of words at the heart of ordinary uses. What Cavell introduces in *Must We Mean What*

12. See Cavell, “Austin at Criticism,” *Philosophical Review* 74 (Apr. 1965): 204–19.

13. “Just think of the expression (and the meaning of the expression) ‘not juste’” [*das treffende Wort*] (*PI*, § 266, p. 226). In French, *juste* and *justesse* connote rightness, fittingness, accuracy as well as fairness, justice.—TRANS.

14. See Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*.

We Say? and expands on later as the object of his reflection on voice is the connection of rightness [*justesse*] of tone, of the adequacy of expression to knowledge of self (self-confidence). He must then navigate adroitly between the Austinian critique of expression as arising from psychology and irrelevant on the one hand and, on the other, caricature forms of emotivism that separate the content of our words from the emotion associated with them. Hence Cavell's interest in what he calls the aesthetic problem. Early on, Cavell proposes a theory of meaning that connects ethics and aesthetics in a Wittgensteinian way: "What is true or false is what human beings say" (*PI*, §241, p. 94). Wittgenstein and Austin demonstrate the need to take into account, in meaning, everything that is said. What is of the order of expression and what is of the order of description cannot be separated within a statement, as if one could break statements down into stabilized propositions and some "additional" force—some psychological stand-in, as pitiful to Cavell as striking a table or one's chest to legitimate or reinforce a contestable or insincere affirmation. Cavell criticizes the idea that ethics or aesthetics could be either emptied out of or contained within an expressive function, a combination of the affective and the cognitive. Turning to literature and to the stage, where ordinary language is brought to life, goes directly against this approach. The problem is semantic, ethical, and political; Cavell denounces a "Manichaeon conception" and a "moral philosophy which distinguishes between the assessment of individual actions and of social practices" (*MW*, p. 47). This critique has been taken up by Cora Diamond, who brings out its full relevance to the relation between ethics and literature.¹⁵

A Different Theory of Relevance

In his work, Cavell has made it his goal to "reinsert . . . the human voice in philosophical thinking."¹⁶ For him, the goal of ordinary language philosophy is indeed to make it understood that language is *spoken*, pronounced by a human voice within a "form of life" (*MW*, p. 84). It then becomes a matter of shifting away from the question of the common use of language—central to the *Philosophical Investigations*—to the entirely new question of the relation between an individual speaker and the language community. For Cavell, this leads to a reintroduction of the voice into philosophy and to a redefinition of subjectivity in language precisely on the basis of the relationship of the individual voice to the linguistic com-

15. See Laugier, *Éthique, littérature, vie humaine* (Paris, 2006).

16. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, 1996), p. 63.

munity: the relation of a voice to voices. The philosopher's task, to bring our words back to earth, is neither easy nor obvious, and the quest for the ordinary is the most difficult of all, even if (and precisely because) it is available to anyone; what is lacking is not knowledge but *wanting to know*.

No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man—unless *wanting to know* is a special position. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers, and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than you yourself.
[MW, p. xlii]

Ordinary language philosophy responds to skepticism not with new knowledge or beliefs but with acknowledgment of our condition, which, to quote one of Cavell's plays on words, is also our diction together. Skepticism, far from dissolving in this community of language, takes on its most radical sense here: what allows me to speak in the name of others? How do I know what *we* mean by a word or world, to take another of Cavell's plays on words? *Must We Mean What We Say?* explores the nature of our *form of life* in language in all its diversity; "language is everywhere we find ourselves, which means everywhere in philosophy (like sexuality in psychoanalysis)."¹⁷

As Cavell says at the beginning of his first essay, Austin's idea that "what we ordinarily say and mean may have a direct and deep control over what we can philosophically say and mean" carries stakes that go beyond the fixed framework of philosophy of language, and if this idea is often rejected by philosophers (traditional as well as analytic) and considered simplistic or blind to the profound nature of philosophical questioning, it is because "such feelings can come from a truth about ourselves which we are holding off" (MW, pp. 1–2). The philosophical interest of turning to what we say appears when we ask ourselves not only what it is to *say* but what this *we* is. For Cavell, this is the question at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*. But it is also Henry David Thoreau (and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who will take on considerable importance in Cavell's work), in his attention to the ordinary and the common, who underwrites the practices of Wittgenstein and Austin. Without Thoreau—to whom Cavell devotes a short and brilliant work, *The Senses of Walden* (1972), published around the same time as *Must We Mean What We Say?*—there would not be this

17. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Essays after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 1989), p. 118; trans. under the title *Une Nouvelle Amérique encore inapprochable, de Wittgenstein à Emerson* by Laugier (Combas, 1991).

passage from the Austinian ordinary to the Wittgensteinian question of criteria; there would not be this need for a change in how we listen to language, a change in musical sensibility to what is said. This was the task Thoreau set for himself in *Walden*: “Our reading, our conversation and thinking, are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins.”¹⁸ This is also what Emerson says in a famous remark often cited by Cavell: “Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.”¹⁹ This falsity, the hopeless inadequacy of our tone and our language, are left unexplained both by the analytic notion of truth and by the correspondence to reality that semantic approaches, continued today by contemporary representationalism, offer. Against these approaches Cavell proposes his own realism, which Diamond calls realistic, grounded in attention to the adequacy or inadequacy of our expressions to ourselves.

It is a matter of replacing or complicating truth with relevance in the tradition of Austin; more precisely, it is a matter of defining truth by our perception of what is relevant to us, by what counts. Cavell takes up the discovery of one’s own relevance and one’s relation to the real again with regard to cinema in another work from this period, “What Becomes of Things on Film” (1977). The given is made up of “the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us.”²⁰

The nature of these appearances and these significances remains to be determined. We would like to call this relevance, which would define an Austinian line of reflection on relevance that could have rivaled the orthodox version; relevance is the adequacy of what one says to what one means—not in relation to some mental content, some idea one has in mind—but rather to what counts for one. The task of the philosopher, and notably the philosopher of language, is to question the relevance of philosophy as relevance to oneself,

so that, for example, my doubts about the relevance of philosophy now, its apparent irrelevance to the motives which brought me to the subject in the first place, were no longer simply obstacles to the philosophical impulse which had to be removed *before* philosophy could

18. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey Cramer (New Haven, Conn., 2004), p. 104.

19. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 2000), p. 137. See Cavell’s afterword in *The Other Emerson*, ed. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis, 2010), pp. 301–6.

20. Cavell, “What Becomes of Things on Film?” *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, 1984), p. 183.

begin, hence motives for withdrawing from the enterprise. It was now possible to investigate philosophically the very topic of irrelevance, and therewith the subject of philosophy itself: it is characteristic of philosophy that from time to time it appear—that from time to time it be—irrelevant to one’s concerns. [*MW*, pp. xxxvi–ii]

For Cavell, there can be no definition of relevance without an examination of what is important. Here, the risk of subjectivism arises: what is relevant for one is not, or is not always, relevant for others. But this is the whole combined argument of *Must We Mean What We Say?* the essay on Thoreau, and the essays on cinema: to show how importance for one and importance for others are connected and mutually express one another; how what is important for me can be important for others and vice versa. We again find the parallel between ordinary language (sensitivity to what we should say and when) and aesthetic judgment (the discourse of criticism as determination of importance). There is no relevance without importance, without an investment in what counts. “But relevance and worth may not be the point. The effort is irrelevant and worthless until it becomes necessary to you to know such things. There is the audience of philosophy; but there also, while it lasts, is its performance” (*MW*, p. xlii).

Criticism is an enterprise in self-knowledge. According to Cavell, this is a defining characteristic of “writing the modern”: “The . . . exercise of criticism is not to determine whether the thing is good that way but why you want it that way.” He proposes a conception of criticism and objectivity according to which “these questions are always together” (*CR*, p. 95). Through the radical association of “the scrupulous exactitude” of artistic desire and “a moral and intellectual imperative,” Cavell redefines meaning (intention) through the conjunction of desire, importance, and value.

When in earlier writing of mine I broach the topic of the modern, I am broaching the topic of art as one in which the connection between expression and desire is purified. In the modern neither the producer nor the consumer has anything to go on (history, convention, genre, form, medium, physiognomy, composition . . .) that secures the value or the significance of an object apart from one’s wanting the thing to be as it is. [*CR*, pp. 94–95]

The Universal Voice and the Infelicitous Word

So what then are the criteria for what is important or significant? Our words and concepts are dead without their criteria for use. Wittgenstein and Austin look for these criteria on the basis of their perception of uses. How can one claim to accomplish this? It is this question—of the essential

absence of foundation to this claim—that defines the sense of *criteria*. In other words, it is the constant question of the relevance of the search that makes for the search's relevance and defines the task of criticism as the critical dimension of philosophy. Hence the importance of the "aesthetic" analysis in "Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy" with all its political consequences, which Cavell goes on to develop in his later work. The principles are already laid out here in this examination of the foundation of our agreements—the natural foundation of our conventions—and of my voice within the community.

Cavell asks in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy":

The question is: Why are some claims about myself expressed in the form 'We . . .'? About what can I speak for others on the basis of what I have learned about myself? . . . Then suppose it is asked: 'But how do I know others speak as I do?' About some things I know they do not; I have some knowledge of my idiosyncrasy. But if the question means 'How do I know at all that others speak as I do?' then the answer is, I do not. I may find out that the most common concept is not used by us in the same way. [MW, p. 67]

The thought of the ordinary thus consists in searching for means to recognize and find one's voice, to find agreement in language and the right, fitting expression—but also to find ways to express inadequacy, unease, disagreement. On what is the appeal to ordinary language based? All that we have is what we say and our agreements in language. The search for agreement—for example, asking, "what would you say if" as Austin does—is based on something entirely different than meanings or determining speakers' "common sense." The agreement Austin and Wittgenstein speak of is in no way an intersubjective agreement. It is as objective as an agreement can be. But where does this agreement come from? In "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" Cavell makes the following remark about Wittgenstein, which would go on to have great resonance for other philosophers, including Hilary Putnam, John McDowell, and Diamond:

We learn and we teach certain words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. 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 . . . of when an utter-

ance 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 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. [MW, p. 52]

Cavell shows at once the fragility and the depth of our agreements and focuses on the very nature of the necessities that emerge from our forms of life. That our ordinary language is founded on nothing but itself is not only a source of disquiet about the validity of what we do and say but also the revelation of a truth about ourselves: the fact is that I am the only possible source of such validity. This is not an existential interpretation of Wittgenstein but a new understanding of the fact that language is our form of life. The acceptance of this fact—which Cavell defines as “the absence of foundation or guarantee for creatures endowed with language and subject to its powers and weaknesses, subject to their mortal condition”²¹—thus does not come as solace but is rather an acknowledgement of finitude and of the everyday.

The originality of Cavell in *Must We Mean What We Say?* is his reinvention of the nature of language and the connection he establishes between the nature of language and *human nature*: finitude. In this sense, the question of agreement in language reformulates ad infinitum the question of the human condition, and acceptance of the latter goes hand-in-hand with acknowledgement of the former. The philosophical problem raised by the philosophy of ordinary language is double. First, by what right do we base ourselves on what we say ordinarily? Next, on what or on whom do we base our determination of what we ordinarily say? But—and here lies the genius of Cavell’s questioning in *Must We Mean What We Say?*—these two questions are but one. The central enigma of rationality and the community is whether it is possible for me to speak *in the name of others*. This explains the shift in Wittgenstein from the paradigm of description to that of confession, as well as the particular autobiographical tone of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In *Must We Mean What We Say?* and in its method the idea that all philosophy is autobiographical was born, and it is certainly here that Cavell’s later project to realize this idea by writing an autobiography began. In the second Wittgenstein, as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thoreau, the genre of autobiography replaces the genres of philosophical treatise, argued essay, and even aphorism.

21. Cavell, preface to *Les Voix de la raison*.

The writer has secrets to tell which can only be told to strangers. The secrets are not his, and they are not the confidences of others. They are secrets because few are anxious to know them; all but one or two wish to remain foreign. Only those who recognize themselves as strangers can be told them, because those who think themselves familiars will think they have already heard what the writer is saying. They will not understand his speaking in confidence.²²

This remark from *The Senses of Walden* brings us back to the voice and the question of the foundations of agreement—the I as the ability to speak in my own name. It is important for Cavell that Wittgenstein says we agree *in* language and not *on* language. This means that we are not agents of the agreement; language precedes this agreement just as much as it is produced by it, and this very circularity constitutes an element of skepticism. An answer to the problem of language will not be found in convention, for convention is not an *explanation* of language's functioning but rather a difficulty within it. The idea of convention cannot account for the real practice of language. Our agreement—with others, with myself—is an agreement of voices; for Wittgenstein our *übereinstimmen* is a “harmonic” agreement (*CR*, p. 32). Cavell defines an agreement that is neither psychological nor intersubjective, and it is founded on nothing more than the validity of a voice. My individual voice claims to be a “universal voice”; this is what a voice does when it bases itself on itself alone, instead of on any condition of reason, in order to establish universal agreement (*CR*, p. 32).

“Aesthetic Problems in Modern Philosophy” puts the question of the foundation of language in these Kantian terms, showing the proximity of Wittgenstein's and Austin's methods to a paradox inherent in aesthetic judgment: basing oneself on *I* in order to say what *we* say. Cavell refers to the well-known passage in §8 of the *Critique of Judgment*. In aesthetic judgment, Kant leads us to discover “a property of our faculty of cognition that without this analysis would have remained unknown”: the “claim to universality” proper to judgments of taste.²³ Kant distinguishes the agreeable from the beautiful, which claims universal agreement, in terms of *private* versus *public* judgment. How can a judgment that has all the characteristics of being private claim to be public, to be valid for all? Kant noted the strange, “disconcerting” nature of this fact, whose *Unheimlichkeit* Wittgenstein took to the limit. The judgment of taste demands universal

22. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York, 1972), pp. 92–93; trans. under the title *Sens de Walden* by Bernard Rival and Omar Berrada (Paris, 2007).

23. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York, 2001), p. 99.

agreement, and it “ascribes this agreement to everyone.”²⁴ It is what Kant calls the universal voice that supports such a claim; it is the *Stimme* heard in *übereinstimmen*—the verb Wittgenstein uses when speaking of agreeing. The question of the universal voice is the question of the voice itself and of its arrogation. When philosophers speak, they use ordinary words in particular ways and claim to speak for all, but nothing about these words says that they will be accepted by others.

Cavell’s question is, how can I know if I adequately project the words I have learned into new contexts? There is an unhappy dimension, a dimension of failure, in ordinary language philosophy, an obsession with cases where language fails, is inadequate, inexpressive, inarticulate. Austin’s classification of “infelicities” in his definition of performatives in *How to Do Things with Words* is the background for Cavell’s analyses.²⁵ The ever-possible failure of performatives defines language as a human activity, fortunate or unfortunate. One of the goals of ordinary language philosophy will be, then, to determine the ordinary ways in which an utterance can be infelicitous, a failure, inadequate to the real. The ever-present and sometimes tragic possibility of the failure of language and action is at the center of Austin’s concerns. Cavell goes further. Skepticism runs throughout our ordinary use of language. I am constantly tempted or menaced by inexpressivity. Cavell brings together Freud and Wittgenstein in their shared awareness of the impossibility of controlling what we say (reinforced by our will to master and to know).

Because the breaking of such control is a constant purpose of the later Wittgenstein, his writing is deeply practical and negative, the way Freud’s is. And like Freud’s therapy, it wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change. . . . In both, such misfortune is betrayed in the incongruence between what is said and what is meant or expressed; for both, the self is concealed in assertion and action and revealed in temptation and wish. [*MW*, p. 72]

Whether it is through ordinary language philosophy or psychoanalysis, the examination of our statements does not give us any greater mastery over our lives or words. This is the radical shift Cavell makes in *Must We Mean What We Say?* This is why in defining, as he does, ordinary language by the *voice*, the voice of the *I* speaking in the name of others—that arrogation that is the mark of all human speech—a new subject, subject of speech, is not reconstituted. In asking how to *mean* what I say, Cavell, far from

24. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

25. See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

reestablishing subjectivity by defining it as voice, turns the question of private language around. The problem lies not in being able to express what I have inside me—thinking or feeling something without being able to say it—but rather the opposite; it is to *mean what I say*. Here, Austin enters. To say, as *How to Do Things with Words* demonstrated, that language is also action does not mean I control language (for, as is clear from the central role excuses play in our lives, I do not control my actions any better). This summarizes an intuition of *Must We Mean What We Say?*: the impossibility of speaking the world masks a refusal to know oneself and to *mean*. “What they had not realized was what they were saying, or, what they were *really* saying, and so had not known *what they meant*. To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world” (*MW*, p. 40).

The question of privacy and of the subject is displaced and becomes that of the fatality of meaning. The problem is no longer non-sense or the impossibility of making sense but the constraints of expression. Understanding that language is our form of life means accepting the naturalness of language and meaning. This is where skepticism arises; the impossibility of accessing the world masks my refusal to acknowledge or know it. The final chapters of *Must We Mean What We Say?* describe this: we are not agents of our language but, to quote Emerson, *victims of expression*. I am as active and as passive in my voice as in my breathing, and the question is no longer simply to be able to reach the community of speakers but also to bear expression.

Form of Life Versus Grammar

A new reading of Wittgenstein, which is the entire importance of “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” is necessary to bring out the reality of expression, what is said, and the way in which the voice is part of our human form of life. To do this, we must redefine what we understand by grammar. There is a certain reading of Wittgenstein that leads to focusing on the *rules* that would constitute grammar, a grammar of the norms of language’s functioning and its “normal” uses, to be acquired like any form of knowledge. Cavell, on the other hand, proposes a reading of Wittgenstein in which learning is initiation into a form of life or, rather, into the “relevant forms of life.” “In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the “forms of life” which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do” (*CR*, pp. 177–78). With this, his first systematic study of Wittgenstein, published in a collection dedicated to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell found the tone for his reading of Wittgenstein, which would go on to

revolutionize the field of Wittgenstein studies. From the beginning Cavell positioned himself against a reading of Wittgenstein represented by David Pole's book,²⁶ which was an institution at the time and has been dominant ever since. In particular, Cavell opposes a false separation between Wittgenstein's first philosophy and his second philosophy, notably, the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. If we wanted to characterize such a reading of Wittgenstein—which, it must be said, has remained more or less dominant down to recent works of reference such as the *Dictionnaire Wittgenstein*²⁷—we could put it thus: the first Wittgenstein was a realist metaphysician looking to establish a logical connection between language and reality, while the second Wittgenstein abandoned this project in favor of describing the rules of use of our language. There would thus be a first Wittgenstein, a realist and metaphysician, and a second Wittgenstein, antirealist and normativist. Cavell was the first to unseat this dogma. In "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" Cavell tells us that Wittgenstein's later philosophy is a return to the ordinary, reteaching us things we know already but do not want to know. When Wittgenstein speaks of rules or language he does not give a thesis or explanation but rather describes; we learn how to use words in certain contexts from our elders, and all our lives we must use them in new contexts and without a safety net, without any guarantee, without universals. We must project them and create new meanings. This is what makes up the fabric of human existence and the *practice* of language.

Such an interpretation of Wittgenstein then makes it possible to read the *Tractatus* retrospectively as a first theory of language use and the practice of its meaning. This is referred to as the resolute or austere (sometimes as the "New Wittgenstein") reading, and it has been illustrated in the works of Diamond and James Conant. It is in fact an understanding of the second Wittgenstein's antimetaphysical project that allows one to see clearly what he wanted to do with the *Tractatus*. However, beyond Cavell's incontestable influence on unorthodox studies of Wittgenstein, we must note his critical innovation, the source of all the others: for Cavell, Wittgenstein's text is *written*, and its statements are not a group of theses. They establish the author's paradoxical position even in the *Tractatus*: the distance between himself and his writings and voice. This represents a new subjectivity, no longer foundational but skeptical, which emerges in the ordinary use of language. In reading a sentence by Wittgenstein one must

26. See David Pole, *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (London, 1958).

27. See Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

be attentive to his tonality and to the sensitivity of meaning to the common use of language.

We find such an attentiveness in the opening sentence of *The Claim of Reason*, which offers a perspective on Wittgenstein's work as critique and the education of the self.

If not at the beginning of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, since what starts philosophy is no more to be known at the outset than how to make an end of it; and if not at the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*, since its opening is not to be confused with the starting of the philosophy it expresses, and since the terms in which that opening might be understood can hardly be given along with the opening itself; and if we acknowledge from the commencement, anyway leave open at the opening, that the way this work is written is internal to what it teaches. . . . how shall we let this book teach us, this or anything? [*CR*, p. 3]

Cavell subverts the recourse to the notion of a rule, replacing it with the notion of criteria and forms of life. We agree in forms of life, but this agreement neither explains nor justifies anything. Here we see the tragic, skeptical dimension of the conception of linguistic community underlying Cavell's interpretations. All that we have is what we say and our agreements, nothing else. Everything, "language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations—a thin net over an abyss" (*CR*, p. 178). In "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" we see clearly Cavell's transition from the question of common language to that of shared forms of life, in which not only social structures are shared but everything that makes up the fabric of human existences and activities. Cavell shows both the fragility and the depth of our agreements and focuses on the very nature of the necessities that for Wittgenstein emerge out of our forms of life.

To agree in language means that language—our form of life—produces our understanding just as much as it is the product of an agreement; that in this sense it is natural to us; and that the idea of convention is there to at once mimic and mask this necessity: "Underlying the tyranny of convention is the tyranny of nature," Cavell will say (*CR*, p. 123). The critique that comes later in *This New Yet Unapproachable America* is already suggested in this earlier text, Cavell's insistence on reading Wittgenstein's concept of forms of life as life forms, not simply *forms* of life. Our forms of *life* are given. Refusing this given is what leads us to want to break our agreements, reject our criteria—that is, refusing this form of life in its biological, not only social, dimension. Cavell insists on this second, vertical aspect of form

of life, while recognizing the importance of the first, horizontal, social agreement. Discussions of this first meaning, conventionalism, have occluded the force of the “natural” sense of forms of *life* in Wittgenstein, the somehow fatal character of the ordinary that Wittgenstein evokes in his mention of “natural reactions,” “the natural history of humanity,” and to which the beautiful epigraph from Jean Giraudoux also seems to refer (*MW*, p. 44). What is given in forms of life are not just our social structures and different cultural habits but everything that has to do with “the specific strength and scale of the human body, senses and voice.”²⁸ Cavell examines what he calls “the natural ground of our conventions” and gives us access to Wittgenstein’s radicality: the turn from the conventional to the natural (*CR*, p. 125). This allows us to understand—beyond any banalities about a Wittgensteinian therapeutic—how reading Wittgenstein can transform us (how it is revolutionary).

This point is still difficult to assimilate today. In a well-known article, McDowell thus commented on the passage on forms of life at the end of “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”:

The terror of which Cavell writes at the end of this marvelous passage is a sort of vertigo, induced by the thought that there is nothing that keeps our practices in line except the reactions and responses we learn in learning them. The ground seems to have been removed from under our feet. In this mood, we are inclined to feel that the sort of thing Cavell describes is insufficient foundation for a conviction that some practice really is a case of going on in the same way.²⁹

As McDowell tries to show in his own reading of Wittgenstein, this disquiet, this “vertigo,” is based on an illusory conception of deductive certitude, which is no more or less founded than the other activities Wittgenstein describes. If we accept the idea that practices such as counting and so on are immanent to our forms of life (dependent, says McDowell) and are nevertheless rational, then we have all the more reason to think so of our other practices. According to McDowell, we then have the treatment for this vertigo: an immanent acceptance of our dependence as being internal to our concepts.

28. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, pp. 41–42. See Laugier, “Wittgenstein and Cavell: Anthropology, Skepticism, and Politics,” in *The Claim to Community, Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford, Calif., 2006).

29. John McDowell, “Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following,” in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (New York: Routledge, 2000). See also Laugier, “Où se trouvent les règles?” in *Lire les ‘recherches philosophiques de Wittgenstein,’* ed. Laugier and Christiane Chauviré (Paris, 2007).

But it is not as obvious as McDowell makes out that the question of skepticism disappears as a result. “Acceptance of forms of life” is not a ready-made answer to philosophical problems, and Wittgenstein certainly would not have appreciated a certain current discourse inspired by his philosophy in which the appeal to forms of life becomes a refusal to examine or question these forms. One of the strengths of Cavell’s reading here is his questioning of such a conception of forms of life—a questioning that, as it turns out, is indissociable from maintaining and reactivating the skeptical question. Within the idea of a form of life, the naturalness of language—its human character, linked to finitude and to the limits of the human body—is forgotten or repressed. The anguish of all learning is the anguish of the rule that nothing assures us that we are on the right track. But this is not an anxiety that the transcendental—or a congealed version of grammar, standing in for the transcendental—could allay.

Nor can treatment for this vertigo—this anxiety inherent to all language use—be found by turning to the community, as Saul Kripke proposes, for such anxiety is provoked precisely by the individual’s relation to the community, the question of *instruction*.³⁰ This shows the limits of a certain anthropological conception of rules, which sees the community’s agreement as the “background” (the expression John Searle takes from Wittgenstein) of all justification of our actions.³¹ Wittgenstein wants to show *both* the fragility and the depth of our agreements and the very *nature* of the necessities that emerge from our forms of life. There is no treatment for skepticism, which is not only doubt about the validity of what we do or say but the revelation that I am the sole possible source of such validity. To reject this, as Kripke does by seeing a source of authority in a master (or in others in the community) is not to respond to skepticism but rather to reinforce it. The concept of the ordinary in “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” makes an oppositional reading to Kripke possible. One acts as if the appeal to the ordinary and to our forms of life (as a given to be accepted) were a solution to skepticism, as though forms of life were, for example, social institutions that it would not, then, make sense to want to overturn or contest. Here, two representations of ordinary knowledge stand opposed: Searle’s representation of the background (the institutions that constitute the background allow us to interpret language, to perceive and follow rules) and Cavell’s representation of the naturalness of forms of life. Now, the term *background* appears in the *Philosophical Inves-*

30. See Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). See also Cavell’s discussion in chapter 2 of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, 1990).

31. See John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York, 1997).

tigations to indicate a representation we make for ourselves (see *PI*, §102), not in order to explain anything. The background thus cannot play a causal role, for it is language itself—our *ordinary* uses, the “hurly-burly” Cavell speaks of and that Wittgenstein describes thus:

How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what *one* man is doing *now*, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action.³²

Through Cavell’s reading, we see the inadequacy of the word *background*; we see an action caught in the middle of the swarming whirlwind of a form of life. It is not the same to say that an application of a rule is determined by the background as to say that the application is to be described within the background of human actions and connections. To follow a rule is part of our (real) life in language. In *The Barometer of Modern Reason*, Vincent Descombes explains that language games need neither justification nor foundation and refers to a manuscript in which Wittgenstein compares the rules of chess to the rules of cooking and grilling, which must correspond to the *nature* of the meat.³³ Wittgenstein will specify that a certain remark is grammatical, but grammar is not a collection of rules for the functioning of language. As Cavell says, grammar teaches us nothing we did not already know. “When [Wittgenstein or the ordinary language philosopher] asks ‘What would we say (what would we call). . . ?’ . . . he is asking something which can be answered by remembering what is said and meant” (*MW*, 64). The problems of philosophy are resolved not by discovering new facts but by perceiving what is already visible. “We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view” (*PI*, §89, p. 47). This sheds light on the relationship between grammar and “transcendental” knowledge. Grammar is not a philosophical method—unless it consists in asking, “what would we say if . . . ?” or, “but would someone call . . . ?” These are questions that ask someone to say something about him- or herself.

So the different methods are methods for acquiring self-knowledge. . . perhaps more shocking, and certainly more important, than any of Freud or Wittgenstein’s particular conclusions is their discovery that knowing oneself is something for which there are methods—something, therefore,

32. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. Anscombe, ed. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Berkeley, 1967), §567, p. 99.

33. Vincent Descombes, *The Barometer of Modern Reason: On the Philosophies of Current Events*, trans. Stephen Adam Schwartz (New York, 1993).

that can be taught (though not in obvious ways) and practiced. [MW, pp. 66–67]

Cavell's first reading of Wittgenstein—more precisely, his reading of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which he at once understood to be *the* book by Wittgenstein, the book in which, in a sense, everything is said—set the tone. By introducing Wittgenstein along with Austin, Cavell shows that “the nature of self-knowledge—and therewith the nature of the self—is one of the great subjects of the *Investigations* as a whole” (MW, p. 68).

The Claim of Reason develops this line of thinking masterfully. But it is nevertheless the case that “The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy” on its own established, within the heart of analytic philosophy, the principles of a nonorthodox reading that continues to inspire readers attentive to the importance of Wittgenstein.

Acknowledgment and Tragedy

Wittgenstein and Austin teach us truths we struggle to acknowledge. What interests Cavell in ordinary language philosophy is this refusal to acknowledge such truths—here, distinguished from the act of recognizing. Acknowledgment is not a matter of recognizing something one already knows in some primary way but, rather, something one does not want to recognize about oneself. In this way American thought is for Cavell what he must always and again make recognized, through rediscovering Emerson and Thoreau's unrecognized works in a dialectic of recognition/disavowal that has been essential to Cavell from the beginning. His theorization of acknowledgement begins with the relation to the ordinary. But, in contrast to other contemporary interpretations of recognition, this acknowledgment is not a matter of will or ethics; it passes through loss and skepticism. This connection between skepticism and acknowledgment emerges in the final chapters of *Must We Mean What We Say?*

According to Cavell, skepticism in its classical form—can I know anything?—represents and masks an incapacity or refusal to know and acknowledge the other, which is also an incapacity to enter into relation with the world. On the basis of this thesis, Cavell proposes a new reading of Wittgenstein and the modern skeptical tradition from Michel de Montaigne to Shakespeare, one that shows the truth of skepticism: tragedy. Skepticism—a denial of knowledge, a break in our contact with the world and common language—cannot be overcome by new knowledge. The only response to skepticism is of the order of acknowledgment and acceptance of finitude and humanity. The question of tragedy is thus directly in line with the discovery of ordinary language in Austin and Wittgenstein,

with the reappropriation of language as mine or ours and with a reinvention of subjectivity in terms of a reappropriation of the human voice through the ear, hearing, and pitch: thus Cavell subverts the visual model of recognition.

In “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Cavell, like Austin, starts from the question of the reality of the outside world and shows that philosophical skepticism and refutations of skepticism share one and the same illusion: that of access to the real through the production of criteria. Our ordinary criteria will always disappoint the will to know; they will never give us the real that philosophy claims. Thus, refutations of skepticism reinforce skepticism; seeking to prove the skeptic wrong, to prove that there is something there and that I know it is the most certain way to never know. This is where Cavell’s reversal lies. The threat of skepticism, instead of being avoided or denied, must be recognized for what it is: it concerns acknowledgement, not knowledge. Cavell’s reading is characterized by an expression of the difference and relation between the two types of skepticism, skepticism concerning our knowledge of the world and skepticism concerning our relation to others. The first skepticism can disappear or be suspended thanks either to philosophical arguments or to the solicitations of everyday life. The second skepticism, says Cavell, is *lived*; it crosses my ordinary life. I *can* live in ignorance of others. This first skepticism is the mask of the second, and it transforms the disquieting question of my contact with others and of their/my recognition as human beings into a question of knowledge. It transforms my refusal to accept and acknowledge my condition into an inability to *know*. Thus, the truth of skepticism appears; doubt disguises a certainty more terrifying than doubt itself. Cavell illustrates this point through Shakespearean tragedy, the heroes of which transform their anxieties about the physical reality of the other into problems of knowledge, for example, doubts about fidelity or paternity. “Tragedy is the place we are not allowed to escape the consequences” of the overlap of the two questions (*CR*, p. 493). The reading of skepticism in *Must We Mean What We Say?* goes doubly against both historical readings of skepticism and the skeptical problems of analytic philosophy, which are centered on the limits of knowledge. It amounts to asking, do we really want to know ourselves? For it is not only a matter of being able to know but of wanting to know, and when the desire to know ourselves is mixed with and abandoned for a denial of knowledge—the refusal to know—it takes the form of skepticism.

This also means that what is shown in tragedy can be shown in farce instead, as Marx said of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. The tragic version of skepticism examined in “Knowing and Acknowledging” and “The Avoid-

ance of Love” will in fact later be formulated in comic terms in Cavell’s most famous and most seductive work, *Pursuits of Happiness*, his reading of Shakespearean themes at the heart of remarriage comedies. The comedies Cavell studies stage ordinary conversation and expressivity as a means of overcoming separation and, thus, skepticism. In this way, there emerges a happy answer to the question of skepticism, as if cinema could *domesticate* skeptical terror and could bring about an acknowledgment of reality and of the fatality of separation and convert it into, as he puts it in *In Quest of the Ordinary*, “the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday.”³⁴

In *Pursuits of Happiness* Cavell shows that the principal aim of the plot in remarriage comedies is not, as in classic or romantic movies, to bring the main couple together, but to bring them back together through a process of mutual acknowledgement. Skepticism and tragedy show us that separateness is the human condition. Cavell’s idea, at once obvious and unprecedented, is to conceive of comedy as the reversal and conversion of skepticism on the basis of similar givens. What in tragedy is skeptical denial of separation becomes in comedy grateful acceptance of this state.

In his essay on *King Lear*, “The Avoidance of Love,” Cavell identifies the philosopher and the tragic hero in their quest for proof of the existence of the real and in their inability to simply accept being a part of it, being real or mortal. “But then 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, a riddle” (*CR*, p. 493). The invention of Shakespearean tragedy is inseparable from the moment in history when a new will to know emerged at the same time as new sources of uncertainty, for this was also the period of Galileo Galilei and René Descartes. Modern skepticism was invented within this new epistemology, whose discoveries opened the way to a more radical ignorance. In this way, modern philosophy wanting to grasp the world instead loses it through a fatality inherent to any procedure of knowledge.

We now understand the connection between these concluding chapters on acknowledgment and the first chapters dedicated to ordinary language. Skepticism is a loss of ordinary expression, a loss of conversation with others and with the real. One figuration of skepticism is the impossibility of conversation, the impossibility of entering into relation with others in language; this is the daily impossibility that tragedy and melodrama stage.³⁵ The path of acknowledgment passes through expression, through over-

34. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p. 178.

35. More recently, in *Contesting Tears*, Cavell has written on melodrama, seeing it as an inverse staging of skepticism and the impossibility of ordinary conversation, the loss of words—thus completing the path that leads from Austin to cinema.

coming the phantasm of inexpressiveness, for the difficulty is not the inexpressible, the impossibility of being expressive, but rather expression itself; expression is exposure to others, and to accept expression is to accept counting for the other, to be acknowledged by him or her. In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell discovers that the solution to skepticism lies not in refutation but in reversal. Skepticism concluded that separateness is the human condition. The avoidance—at once to avoid and to make void the relation—this conclusion is fatal. This fatality can only be gotten around by the opposite of avoidance: acknowledgment.

In bringing together skepticism and tragedy, as he does from *Must We Mean What We Say?* onward, Cavell shows that skepticism is not a problem of knowledge but of experience. The problem is not our ignorance of the world or of others; it is our refusal to know and expose ourselves to one or the other. This is not a theoretical difficulty but a practical one. Doubt about the existence of the other is seen to be a mask for the unbearable certainty of his or her reality; tragedy is the paroxysmic moment in which one chooses the death of the other so as to avoid this certainty. Remarriage comedies, on the other hand, represent the moment when tragedy is reversed, and this certainty is accepted without avoidance. The remarriage comedy turns on the same themes as tragedy or skepticism. To acknowledge the other means to accept being his or her equal, proximate, same, and other, to open oneself to the intimate and explosive mixture of friendship and amusement, on the one hand, and *romance* and sexuality on the other, that define the conversation of marriage and constitute a charm of ordinary human life. Shakespearean tragedy brings out the capacity of the ordinary to engender skepticism. American comedy brings out the capacity of the ordinary to invent a new understanding of acknowledgment without denying tragedy. “The tragedy is that comedy has its limits. This is part of the sadness within comedy; the emptiness after a long laugh. Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine and the other is yours” (*MW*, pp. 339–40). But tragedy is also not a key or a general catchword. What is tragic, says Cavell, is that “tragedy itself has become ineffective, out-worn, because now even death does not overcome our difference.” Death in tragedy is not solely a figure of necessity, and “a radical necessity haunts every story of tragedy.” It is “the enveloping of contingency and necessity by one another, the entropy of their mixture” that produces the tragic at the heart of the ordinary and, in the same movement, redefines the importance of being human (*MW*, pp. 340–41).

Must We Mean What We Say? is a book about the modern, and, as the interrogative form of the title suggests, about the definition and possibility of *critique*. By exploring our relation and relevance to ourselves—to our

philosophical, political, and cultural tradition—it reveals the connection among the words we pronounce and hear, the truth we search for, and the life we want to lead, which was in fact revolutionary in American philosophy of the 1960s. *Revolutionary* is the word Cavell uses in his “Foreword” for “Wittgenstein’s and Austin’s sense of their tasks [as] . . . a recognizable version of the wish ‘to establish the truth of this world’”: “Wherever there really is a love of wisdom—or call it the passion for truth—it is inherently, if usually ineffectively, revolutionary; because it is the same as a hatred of the falseness in one’s character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one’s institutions” (*MW*, p. xxxix). This revolutionary character, which Cavell attributes not only to Wittgenstein and Austin but also to Freud, Nietzsche, Thoreau, and Kierkegaard and to their capacity to transform us, is still, perennially, that of *Must We Mean What We Say?*