DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Problems of Style in Philosophy.
Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams

SUPERVISOR: PAOLO TRIPODI   CANDIDATE: PAOLO BABBIOTTI

CURRICULUM: HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

XXXIV CYCLE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Preface and Introduction

0.1 Preface

As is well known, the concept of style is encountered in a vast number of different fields. It is really a wide concept, used and studied in aesthetics, as well as in the history and theory of visual art, music, theater and cinema; in fashion, architecture or design; in philosophy, literature or cultural criticism; in linguistics, pragmatics or sociology. Even in various sports and in everyday life (and the list could go on). Depending on the field, then, this concept seems to take different turns. Faced with this plurality of worlds, the feeling one can get is one of disorientation. Is it really possible to provide a general characterization of the concept of style that takes into account all these domains? Indeed, how can one define style? Well, it depends on whether one is talking about style in theater, or film, or fashion, or sociology, or sports, and so on. Depending on the field of reference, and the particular cases we decide to investigate, some relevant aspects of the concept of style seem to change. Trivially, because the agents, their field of action, and the products of their action change. Yet, this fact has not discouraged some attempts to characterize a somewhat general concept of style.[1] This is not exactly what I want to do. In fact, my dissertation will not attempt to investigate the notion of style in itself, regardless of the differences of the various fields; and, on the other hand, it will not investigate the specificities of every notion of style involved in each field.[2] What I am

---

[1] In contemporary Anglo-American aesthetics, for example, the attempt to classify various aspects related to the concept of style was coordinated by Berel Lang in the collection of essays *The Concept of Style* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1987). This volume includes contributions by, among others, Richard Wollheim, Kendall L. Walton, Monroe Beardsley, Hayden White and Berel Lang himself. Another attempt at classification can be read in Nelson Goodman's "The Status of Style" (*Critical Inquiry*, 1(4), 1975, 799–811); or in "'Style' for historians and philosophers" by Ian Hacking (*Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, Volume 23, Issue 1, 1–20). Or, again, in the further collection of essays edited by Caroline A. Van Eck, James McAllister and Renée Van De Vall called *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 1995) with contributions again by Wollheim and Lang, the volume's editors and, among others, Charles Altieri.

[2] Such as the specificities of style in literature. For a very brief list of references focusing on style in literature, one can cite some great classics such as: Šklovkij's *Theory of Prose* (*О теории прозы*) (1925), Leo Spitzer's *Stilstudien* (1928), Gian Franco Contini's *Esercizi di lettura sopra autori contemporanei con un'appendice su testi non contemporanei* (1939), and Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der Abendländischen Literatur* (1946).

interested in doing in what follows is not primarily to investigate the notion of (literary) style in philosophy, but mainly to focus on the concept of "philosophical style".

Attempts at characterization have also been made for this concept.[3] For example, in the Anglo-American context, Berel Lang published a book which has "philosophical style" in its title: *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*. Reading the book, one discovers that it is actually concerned with dissecting several literary issues in philosophy; Lang wants mainly to investigate, as he writes, "philosophy *as* literature"[4] and "to outline the theoretical issues entailed by a general conception of 'literary philosophy'" (i.e., "the relevance to philosophical writing of such literary categories as authorial point-of-view, genre, tropes, and figurative discourse is considered").[5] Intuitively, I do not think that 'philosophical style' can be merely reduced to 'literary style in philosophy' (and, to be fair, I don't think Lang wants to make this reductionist move either). However, things become difficult when one wants to indicate what precisely the word "philosophical" is adding to "style"; there are various ways to allude to this addition, and Lang's book, at times, seems to go in that direction as well, although not explicitly; not pushing very far in that line of inquiry. Understanding more precisely what "philosophical" adds to "style", not in an allusive way, but as explicitly as possible, will be one of the aims of my dissertation.

At a first approximation, I will just need a very simple account of where the difference may lie between a 'philosophical style' and a 'literary style in philosophy'. One could say that a literary style in philosophy refers to *how one writes*, and a philosophical style to *how one thinks*. Of course, how one thinks can be revealed by how one writes, but also in other ways. This dissertation will focus

---

[3] For instance, see Brand Blanshard's rather dated book *On Philosophical Style* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1969); more recent attempts to address the concept of philosophical style are, for instance, collected in the volume 39, 2014, of the *Journal of Philosophical Research*, edited by Áine Mahon, on "The American Style in Philosophy", which includes papers like Maria Baghramian's "The Depths and Shallows of Philosophical Style", Christopher Hookway's "Peirce, Pragmatism, and Philosophical Style", and Sarin Marchetti's "Style and/as Philosophy in William James".

[4] At least in the first half of the book. The second half is dedicated to what Lang calls the philosophy *of* literature.

[5] These are all interesting topics, touched upon, e.g., by Paolo D'Angelo on the various literary genres of philosophy; or by a literary critic like Fredric Jameson on the literary style of Sartre. These studies are all very rich and much can be learned from each one. There is not even too clear a demarcation line between these studies and what I want to do; that is, something else, a little different — to study *philosophical style*. For reasons that will be made clear in the course of the dissertation.

mainly on philosophical style — a way of thinking — as expressed by how one writes. How one writes, however, not for the sheer sake of beauty or literary virtuousness (or other literary purposes), but for philosophical purposes and having philosophical consequences. Indeed, a philosophical style has to do with the particular kind of truth that the philosopher is seeking, or the particular kind of truthfulness that the philosopher wants to exemplify.[6]

I think that an author who investigated — though not in a very explicit way — these *philosophical* dimensions internal to the concept of "philosophical style" (conceived as something different and not reducible to literary style) is Manfred Frank. Frank comes from another tradition than Lang's, the German and hermeneutic tradition, and wrote a relevant study of the concept of philosophical style called *Style in Philosophy* (in the original, *Stil in der Philosophie*).[7] There is no trace of Lang's efforts in Frank's text. In fact, his intent seems to be different: to look at the importance of style in philosophy "as if for the first time". In this regard, my dissertation will be inspired by Frank's approach: like Frank, who was primarily interested in Wittgenstein, I will be interested in other contemporary philosophers who, similarly to Wittgenstein, have tried to emphasize the importance

---

[6] A straightforward example is the difference between what we could call a Platonic and a Wittgensteinian style. They can both be conceived as a style of thought and as a way of manifesting truthfulness or the desire for truth. The Platonic style, in fact, features the Socratic "What is x?" almost as a tic, and the pressure to ask the "What is x?" question is a feature of its philosophical style, not just of its literary style; secondly, the quest for generality is the Platonic way of answering the demand of truthfulness: within this way, giving examples is not satisfying, there is something wrong in merely giving examples of, say, "virtue", because one would then have to say what all these examples have in common. This second feature is obviously based on a doctrinal view, for which the answer to a "What is x?" question must lead to the identification of a form. A Wittgensteinian style, on the other hand, is much more favorable to the use of examples: precisely because it does not accept the Platonic view that there is something untruthful in merely giving examples. As Wittgenstein writes in the *Blue Book*: "meaning" is not a noun; meaning is something we do — *we mean*. Thus, in the Wittgensteinian way, one gets a different approach to the question, which from "What is it?" becomes something like "What are we doing?" (and also "Who are we?"). It is then a matter of philosophical style to be suspicious of the Platonic noun-based tradition.

[7] See M. Frank, "Style in Philosophy: Part I", *Metaphilosophy*, Volume 30, Issue 3, July 1999, 145–167; and M. Frank, "Style in Philosophy: Parts II and III", *Metaphilosophy*, Volume 30, Issue 4, October 1999, 264–301; original German version is M Frank, *Stil in der Philosophie*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 1992.

of style in philosophy; stylistically self-conscious authors,[8] who have used style in many ways, and have tackled different "problems of style" (as I will call them in Chapter One).

Frank's piece closed with a thesis we might call "ineffabilist": after all, to the importance of style one cannot do much more than allude; style is an important but indefinable, inherently intractable dimension. This is a point of disagreement between Frank's approach and my approach: in my dissertation, I want to arrive at a somewhat explicit characterization of the concept of style, and of philosophical style — analogous to the efforts made by Lang. Unlike Lang, however, I have decided to arrive at a characterization of both concepts through the use of fewer but more focused case studies: I will investigate only the work of two philosophers,[9] Stanley Cavell (1926-2018) and Bernard Williams (1929-2003), but I will do so with an extreme level of detail and particularity; this will help in addressing even more directly and explicitly not just the literary strategies that these authors employ, but also the style of thought and demand of truthfulness which guide both their philosophies, and that give substance to both philosophical styles.

I am also interested in studying the formation of a philosophical style in relation to the personality of the philosopher, and how it evolves over time. Therefore, I cannot limit myself to one or two works; but to an assessment that is as comprehensive as possible. And that is why I will integrate the dissertation with two quantitative studies, in which all the works of these philosophers will be taken into account for a critical analysis of their style. In this sense, my dissertation will not be stopped by the notion of the ineffable. On the contrary, it is guided by the conviction that the concepts of style and of philosophical style are certainly elusive, but not entirely ineffable. There are some ways they can be, so to speak, *effed*. Maybe these ways won't be the straightforward bullet points that can be easily said, or listed; as Wittgenstein thought, however, there are many ways of showing something you cannot straightforwardly say.[10] Every chapter of this dissertation will be a way of doing that —

---

[8] See, for instance, Wittgenstein's *Letter to Ludwig Von Ficker*, as cited and discussed by L. Perissinotto, "'Il lavoro è rigorosamente filosofico e insieme letterario'. Note al Tractatus logico-philosophicus e sulla sua Prefazione", *Il Pensiero. Rivista di filosofia*, LX-2021/2, 1–7.

[9] From a structural point of view, comparing two authors bears the advantages of what Edward Said, in a different context (i.e., the postcolonial studies) has called "contrapuntal reading". One author will be better illuminated by the background of the other, and vice versa (like the colonial perspective is better grasped in counterpoint with the colonized perspective). See E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Vintage, 1993.

[10] See A. Moore, "On Saying and Showing", in *Philosophy*, Volume 62, Issue 242, October 1987, 473–497.

and, as it turned out, it becomes easier to say something significant about style after you actually showed something significant about it.[11]

How did I come to outline the path of my dissertation? After the disorientation caused by the truly vast amount of studies on style, I decided to start with as general a characterization as possible, trying to understand, in such a vast sea, where my interest lay in analyzing this concept. It was necessary, like Frank, to place myself in front of style "as if for the first time", asking myself a question as simple as it is disorienting: "What do I mean by style?". Thanks to this general characterization, accomplished in the Introduction, I realized not only what we can mean by style, but that my interest, as far as the study of style in philosophy is concerned, lies in a closer analysis of the work of those philosophers, such as Cavell and Williams, whom I have called "stylists of philosophy" — philosophers who are very conscious not only as regards the various problems of style, but also as regards the creation of their own personal and idiomatic style. Studying closely, with the help of focused case studies, the work of such philosophers not only can bring us closer to grasping the importance of style in philosophy, but can also enrich our understanding of some of the dynamics to which a conscious and researched style gives rise.

To give just one example: an interesting dynamic between style and metaphilosophy will emerge from the pages that follow. Naïvely, we might think that metaphilosophy (understood as the set of purposes and intents of a philosopher) is in direct and unproblematic relation to the style adopted: one's purposes call for a particular style, which one adopts assuming that it will not distort too much one's original intentions. In studying closely the works of philosophers-stylists such as Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams, by contrast, I have been able to observe a dialectical relationship between metaphilosophy and style: the style that is invoked by a certain metaphilosophy, once unfolded and fielded, possesses as it were a life of its own — a life capable of modifying, in the long run, the starting metaphilosophical intents. In these terms, there exists something like *the discovery of a style*. By finding oneself adopting a certain style, and continuing to

---

[11] This does not preclude the fact that there will be times when I will limit myself to showing, helping the readers to see some significant aspects of Cavell's and Williams's philosophical style, guiding their eye and ear, but also leaving them the possibility of noticing further elements by themselves. This is something I acknowledge to be allowed by my use of long block quotations, which I will find not only useful but also necessary in order to show the import of both Cavell's and Williams's philosophical styles.

do so over time (with various adjustments and slippages, of course), one will eventually modify or clarify one's starting metaphilosophical assumptions. The two poles, then, are in a dialectical relationship: a starting metaphilosophy invokes a certain style; the style adopted turns out to be, yes, in agreement with the starting aims, but it also reveals other important aspects, some of which may be partly at odds with those aims;[12] this contrast, finally, is resolved in an author's complete work, in which, pulling the strings, one can see what figure this dialectical relationship has given rise to (and how, and whether, it will have departed from the starting assumptions). In this sense, it becomes even more interesting to examine two authors who, like Cavell and Williams, seem to agree on some basic metaphilosophical assumptions. However, before discussing these assumptions and observing how they will change after their respective discoveries of style, let us simply ask, *as if for the first time*, "What do we mean by style?".

Bibliographical Note

Four of the following sections are reworkings of papers published during my PhD period. In chronological order, they are "Compression: Nietzsche, Williams, and the problem of style", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2021, 937–947; "Attraverso gli esempi. Lo stile filosofico di Bernard Williams", *Rivista di filosofia*, 1/2021, 43–59; "Attraverso gli esempi. Lo stile filosofico di Stanley Cavell", *Iride*, 2022, 235–247; (with M. Ciruzzi) "Doing philosophy as opening parentheses: quantifying the use of parentheses in Stanley Cavell's style", *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 2022; "Lingering: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and the problem of style", *Philosophy and Literature*, 2023, 184–199. They are incorporated in Sections 3.1, 2.2, 2.1, 5.1, and 3.2 respectively.

---

[12] In the varied dialectic between style and metaphilosophy there is also a particular combination, which is not investigated in this dissertation: when similar styles of philosophical writing support different metaphilosophical conceptions. For example, there is the case of Dummett and Strawson, who, as shown in Chapter 6 ("Necessity, Style and Metaphilosophy") of Paolo Tripodi's book *Analytic Philosophy and the Later Wittgensteinian Tradition* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), exhibit writing styles similar to those of David Lewis (abstract, general and systematic theory construction; presentation of philosophical arguments; presence of both metalinguistic and groundlevel analysis; logical sophistication), though from a metaphilosophical point of view they are different: this is because Dummett and Strawson conceive philosophical theories as linguistic-conceptual descriptions, while Lewis conceives them as substantive explanations.

0.2 Introduction

What Do We Mean by Style? Examples from Sports, Everyday Life, Arts, and Philosophy

By style one could mean the set of choices to which an author remains adherent throughout his or her work. Each of the elements of this characterization is contestable; the most obvious difficulty lies in the use of the term "choice". To test such characterization, and specifically the hold of the term "choice", let us start with a sporting example.

In our ordinary language, in fact, we talk about the style of tennis players. We comment on tennis matches, and to varying degrees of skill and expertise, we are able to *recognize* the different styles of different tennis players and we are able to *admire* the styles of our favorite ones. In the difference between these two verbs (recognize and admire), a first internal tension in the concept of style is revealed, to which we will return. For now, let us limit ourselves to the question of recognizing a style.

The performance of a very unskilled tennis player, for example, may be judged by observers as weak and clumsy. However, there are times when these judgments will not sound so negative. Let us imagine that, for a charity event, Roger Federer makes himself available for short matches with some of his fans, who are willing to pay a small sum for a challenge with the master, and who are thrashed for a charitable gesture. Are Federer's challengers, who are not professional tennis players, *choosing* to play poorly? To show an awkward style? Certainly not, they *found themselves* playing that way. They would have liked to show a better style, but they were not able to. This is because they never formed, through training, those complex dispositions, skills, and habits that would have allowed them to perform better. If they had been long-time tennis players, and if they had worked hard, perhaps some of the spectators might have judged their performance as tenacious and honorable, even in the case where they had not won a single set.

By the end of our imaginary matches, then, the styles of all players, from the strongest to the weakest, will have been revealed. Yet, there are those who would be tempted to say that, during these charity matches, only one player *really* showed style: and that was Roger Federer. I think we are tempted to say this because we are used to employing the word style in exceptional contexts, as a qualitative surplus ("You got style!"). A tennis player *with style* is an exceptional tennis player, capable of great moves, remarkable in every minute detail. However, we use the word style not only

to refer to exceptional performances — the kind of performances that arouse our admiration — but also to refer to entirely ordinary events. If we think about it, just leading an ordinary life is enough to acquire a style.

In fact, we speak of "lifestyle". Again, in order to identify a certain style, it seems to be central to think of the set of choices that remain constant over time. For example, a friend of mine leads an unregulated lifestyle. This is because she wakes up late in the morning, sleeps late at night, drinks a lot of alcohol and chain-smokes, and is not methodical or focused. Now, does this friend of mine *choose* to behave this way? A good question for a psychoanalytic session.

In order to identify a style, it is not important how voluntary the choice is, it is important that it is carried out. With the term choice I do not mean the intention behind the action, but its actual realization. Someone could object that I could use, instead of "choice", words like "action" or "move", which in the case of tennis, and games in general, would work very well. This is an objection I take seriously. For now, I am not deviating from the term "choice" because it seems to me to have some advantages. In fact, in the case of *more or less* voluntary actions, as the example of the tennis game has well shown, talking about choice is not entirely wrong: we can understand by choice the way of selecting, and carrying out, one behavior rather than another. In such a circumstance, we are inclined to say that *a certain solution has been adopted*. I will mean by choice "the adoption of a certain solution".[13]

In tennis matches, for example, we can *choose* to dampen the ball or to whip it, to hit hard or to hit relaxed... Examples from everyday life come to our aid when we lack the words to judge with confidence in more technical areas. Let us take the case of emotional distress as an example. In such a situation, we can choose not to react, not to fight, and just go to sleep. Something is stronger than us, and we let it go. In that case, we would behave in a submissive way. Is this episode of ours enough to speak, in our case, of a submissive lifestyle? Not at all.

In order to speak of a submissive lifestyle, these behaviors must be repeated consistently over time, and come to constitute a defining trait of our personality. Coming to terms with certain character traits, stronger than ourselves, can come to constitute a lifestyle — which will be composed of the

---

[13] Or resolution. In this term we can glimpse echoes of a formulation by the young Lukács: "Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence", G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel. A Historic-Philosophical Essay of the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1916), trans. A. Bostock, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1971, 61–62.

set of choices that, for better or worse, we have accommodated or found ourselves accommodating. Examples from sports and everyday life show that there is a difference between *choosing* a style and *finding oneself* having one. In the tennis example, these two extremes are represented by Federer and the non-professional player. Between them, there are a number of intermediate cases — ranging from the totally amateur player to the "tennis god", from the maximum imperfection to the maximum perfection (to which, of course, even Federer only comes close, without ever reaching it). A good question to ask seems to be: what are these intermediate cases characterized by? They seem to me to be characterized by a set of choices constrained in different ways: by circumstances, which lead an author to find himself adopting a solution — where the term "find oneself" indicates the fact that much of what one would like to do cannot be accomplished as one would like, but is nevertheless accomplished in some way; by the culture from which one comes, which may have provided some training or schooling or none; by the more or less natural dispositions of the agents, and so on. It is important to remember how many constraints are present in the intermediate range between the two extremes; and they both, on closer consideration, turn out to be in fact unrealistic, because they imply on the one hand a fantasy of absolute control and, on the other hand, a fantasy of absolute lack of control.

Even in examples drawn from everyday life there is a dialectic of this kind, a dialectic between actively choosing and finding oneself choosing, between total control and total lack of control. Here, too, there are varying degrees of voluntariness and involuntariness, awareness and unawareness. These contrasts emerge very clearly in the psychoanalytic setting. Take for example one of the most frequent clinical cases, that of the neurotic. A neurotic person is characterized by recurrent traits — traits of which she may not be aware, and which are more or less determined by her experience (for example, they may be determined by certain events in her childhood). What is the difference between this person and a person who undergoes regular therapy, whose fruits are beginning to be seen over time? The latter person is undoubtedly more aware, and may even change her basic attitudes: she may, for example, change her relationship with her body, or change other spontaneous reactions (which may be harmful, such as anger attacks, or panic attacks) to which she had succumbed. To both people, however, we can attribute a style: in the first case, the style is as if "sewn on" to the person; in the second case, the style is the result — at least in part —

of a conquest.

To summarize, from the analysis of sporting and everyday life examples, we find a dynamic between choosing and finding oneself choosing; having traits (of a game, or of character) that one has largely chosen and of which one is aware; and having traits (of a game, or of character) that one has found themselves to have chosen and of which one is not aware.

Obviously, it is possible to swap the elements of this second dynamic: one can, for example, have traits that one has chosen in small part and of which one is aware; or have traits that one has chosen in large part but of which one is not aware. This last situation, although paradoxical, could have to do with choices made in the past, and then forgotten. In general, in everyday life as in tennis the degree of awareness is difficult to establish, and certainly varies. (In this regard, one can briefly mention a paradoxical case from music: I am thinking of *improvisation*. When a musician improvises, it may happen that he or she is choosing traits of which he or she is only in part aware.)

Now, it seems to me that none of these cases denies the possibility of applying the word *style*. Style belongs to both the non-professional player and the tennis god; to both the neurotic and the person with a long history of psychoanalysis; to both the unregulated and the (painstakingly and laboriously) ordered life. In all these contexts, from the most to the least ordinary, we speak of style.

This distinction — between ordinary and extraordinary cases — raises a problem that I have not yet addressed. In the case of tennis, in fact, and particularly in the example of the charity matches, I assumed that as long as even less skilled players respected the rules of tennis, then they were playing tennis and not something else. The rules of tennis consist of throwing the ball at a certain height, touching a certain part of the court, receiving and hitting in a certain way... *Those* (implied: those that an expert would be able to list for us) are the minimum requirements of the game of tennis. Now, we can ask ourselves: is meeting the minimum requirements of a certain activity (like playing tennis, not badminton) a necessary condition for a certain style to emerge? If so, is it also a sufficient condition?

Faced with this twofold question, I answer: meeting the minimum requirements of an activity is a necessary and sufficient condition for forming a style such as what I have called, with a metaphor, "as if sewn on", more unintentional and unconscious. If I play tennis (implied: if I *really* play tennis, respecting its rules, and not playing another game) then I *will be condemned* to have a style.

My style will be immature and amateur, if I am a novice tennis player, but it will nonetheless be a style. In this sense, as we have already stated, living is enough to acquire a style. Only the dead have no style, and even animals — to the extent that they carry out certain activities with a certain frequency while excluding others — acquire a lifestyle.

But what about the cases in which a behavior does not show any kind of recognizable *pattern*? Cases in which, no matter how hard we try, we cannot see any repetition? Someone, in fact, could play tennis in a way that is always different, without any traits we can recognize as repeated and predictable. If it is an adult person, it becomes difficult to imagine that he or she is not doing it on purpose, that his or her performance is not, for example, the result of a particularly sophisticated choice (aimed, for example, at surprising the audience).

However, if we did not recognize a style of play at all, and if this person's performance varied with disarming ease, speed, and unrecognizability, then we would perhaps begin not only to be admired, but also a little *frightened* — that person would be alien to us, just as the behavior of a totally unstable, totally unpredictable person would be alien to us.

What about children? Typical of childhood is to behave... (and it will be the task of a parent, or a pediatrician, or a novelist, or the children themselves to continue with a plausible list). A child's lifestyle will be formed during childhood. In this sense, just *having been* a child is enough to have acquired one — or many — style(s). At this point, I think the question more or less arises: when does one cease to have one style? And when does one acquire another? What, *if anything*, remains constant in the transition from one style to another? It is not so simple to establish, and in daily life we do not go through such clear and demarcable periods as those of the colors in Picasso (and perhaps this fact could lead us to doubt the periodizations in other contexts, such as art history).

If the minimum requirements of an activity are met, as we said, a style will necessarily emerge. Federer and I both play tennis; I will *find myself* playing with an awkward, clumsy style; Federer will *choose* an elegant, sumptuous style. And it is at this level that the term "choice" becomes crucial. When we are tempted to say that *only* Federer has had style over the course of matches, what tempts us, I believe, is Federer's set of moves, carefully selected and perfected over time. While I have my choices, my possibilities, "sewn on"— and in order to be able to peel off the more or less natural dress I wear, I will have to train and change my game dispositions.

Now, does it make sense to say that Federer *chose* those moves? Because, as we have already noted,

he could not *just pick them* either. He chose them and, together, he also found himself choosing them (he is not, in fact, despite what many may believe, the almighty god of tennis). Some solutions may have emerged in a difficult context, in which a sudden and unexpected reaction was required; when faced with such circumstances, even Federer (like the non-professional player) found himself playing in a certain way, a way that he then perhaps consolidated in his career (something that the non-professional player did not have the time to do, as he or she never trained). And it is thanks to these concrete situations, thanks to these circumstances, that Federer has been able to mature his unmistakable *touch*.

A tennis player with touch, however, is a very different tennis player from an ordinary tennis player. Just as different will be his or her style: speaking (as it is used in ordinary language) of touch, I refer to possessing a personal, individual, idiomatic style. Now, in these cases, it can be observed that the minimum requirements are necessary conditions but not at all sufficient to develop a personal style. A personal style, matured with time, will never be entirely "sewn on". It will not be enough for me to play a game of tennis for the first time in my life, respecting the rules, to show a personal style with a touch that is not only recognizable, but also admirable. A touch consolidated over time through a series of adopted solutions that I have kept stable, repeated, and learned to make recognized as *my own*.

In the light of the considerations of this second part of the introduction, therefore, my proposal is already slightly changed. To speak of choice *tout court*, in fact, proves unsatisfactory to speak of a style that emerges simply from performing an activity within minimum requirements. At the same time, choice is always accompanied, even in cases of a more marked personal style, by the phenomenon of finding oneself. So I update my initial characterization and write the following: one could mean by style a set of traits that remain constant over the course of an author's work — traits that a more conscious author might have chosen, or that were instead chosen by something else for him or her.[14] This further characterization already has some problems, one among them arising from inserting a possibility in the sentence after the em-dash ("might have chosen").

---

[14] This characterization of style has clear resemblances to certain claims made by Richard Wollheim in "Criticism as Retrieval", in *Art and its Objects* (1968), Second Edition, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 124–136. Even though I wasn't inspired by Wollheim while writing this introduction, I acknowledge that his theory represents an illustrious precursor of this kind of formulation.

Moreover, as we have already noted, even a not very conscious author could have made certain choices, and then forgotten about them. But I find that such cases are much rarer, and are almost entirely limited to everyday life.

I am mainly interested in the figures of the *stylists*, those who, consciously, are interested in forming their own personal style. Stylists *par excellence*, even more than in sports, can be found in the arts. Let us therefore look at this vast field, isolating it with examples from cinema.

I believe that cinema provides clear examples of how a particular style is both important and recognizable. A director like Stanley Kubrick, for example, had a maniacal attention to the geometricity of the environments in his films. To limit ourselves to the case of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and to limit ourselves to the role of the arrangement of the images (and not to that of the music, for example, or of the dialogues) it is evident how many of the environments filmed aim to be perfectly symmetrical. When I speak of adherence and constancy in relation to style, therefore, I want to refer to the exercise of control in a given field of expression. In the case of Kubrick — to stick to an example that has become part of our cultural baggage — the choice of taking geometric environments is carried forward during *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which is characterized as a film where many spaces are perfectly geometric. To carry out a choice, to remain faithful to it, to remain adherent to it: these are all synonyms for what I mean.

We can immediately notice a difference from the sphere of sports. These, in fact, are clearly (and quite strictly) codified. As much as a player may excel and shine in style (in the sense of a Federer's style), he will not be able to twist the rules of the game. If he did, he would not meet the minimum requirements and therefore could no longer be fit as a tennis player. In the case of the arts, however, there seems to be more freedom. In the world of cinema, different directors can develop their own style starting from totally different choices: for example, there are those who focus more on the study of the geometry of spaces and those who focus more on the role and function of color (and those who, obviously, take both aspects into account).

Wes Anderson's films, to give a precise example, are not only distinguished by bright and flamboyant colors, but also assign precise intentions to the choice of colors, such as the intention to convey irony thanks to the combination of darker shades where one would expect lighter ones, and vice versa. We can give the example of *Moonrise Kingdom*: this film, in fact, is played entirely on the contrast between yellow and blue, and it is also played on the reversal of the symbolism of both

colors.

One would expect, conventionally, the transmission of calm and serenity from the color blue; instead, in the course of the film, the situation of maximum tension and danger is filmed entirely in shades of blue, which contribute to providing an alienating sensation. We are certain that the protagonists — two children in love who are running away from their respective families (natural or adoptive) — are in danger, hovering from the top of the tower where they are sheltering, and threatening suicide. All this to avoid being caught by their enemy, called (with certainly ironic intentions) Social Services, a woman entirely clad in blue and played by Tilda Swinton. Social Services and the tense situation at the top of the tower are terrible; however, their being covered in blue makes us look at them in another light; less terrible, more ambiguous and human.

The ironic effect is aimed at overturning our expectations. Even the color yellow is entrusted with such a task. Yellow, in fact, typically associated with happiness and joy, as well as with youth, is used to cover the clothes and the environments of the events of these two children — who, however, as already mentioned, assume strangely (and awkwardly) adult traits. Also in this case, therefore, through the reversed and ambiguous use of colors, Wes Anderson leaves us with an alienating sensation.

I will make one last consideration about *Moonrise Kingdom* (in order to make the example of this film, which has entered less into the shared cultural baggage than *2001: A Space Odyssey*, even clearer): the entire contrast between yellow and blue could seem like a Manichean contrast between good and evil, which would flatten the protagonists and the entire story into a moral universe with definite and simple traits. However, their ironic juxtaposition with ambiguous scenes and characters contributes to making Anderson's films adhere to the complexity and ambiguity of human affairs. This is a set of choices found in other Anderson's films as well, and thus a style that is well recognizable and formed, and refined, through time.

Let us now turn to the main object of my investigation, to which I have not assigned the first word precisely because it shares with many other fields (sports and art, as well as everyday life) attention to problems of style: I am talking about philosophy. A first problem we can dwell on is the following: is it a field that encourages a plurality of styles (such as cinema, for example), or is it a more codified and stable field (such as various sports, for example)?

There are philosophers who have encouraged the cultivation of a plurality of styles, and who have conceived of philosophy as a form of art, on par with cinema. In these artistic fields, in fact, there are many ways in which to attempt to stabilize one's expression, and these ways — as in cinema — can also be at odds with each other, and not just between different directors, but within the individual director. (Pasolini, for example, produced both black-and-white and color films, and used both comic and tragic registers.) One might be tempted, however, to ask: within an artist's poetics, do these styles refer to a single major style? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. More times no, I would say. But it is an empirical question to verify this fact. (And we can also call to mind the question posed earlier: when can we trace, with certainty, the transition from one style to another?) In philosophy, a striking example is that of Nietzsche. His philosophy is *a philosophy of styles*, as Nietzsche was able to adopt, and to stabilize, many styles: even within the same work, he used polemic, poetic, moral, aestheticizing, metaphysical, scientific styles... Here too, as in the case of cinema, we could ask ourselves: is there something that holds all these styles together? A single great style to which they all refer? Some might say yes, while I am skeptical. Nietzsche could have used different styles and *that's it*.

The difficulty of such an undertaking is considerable and in fact, thinking about Nietzsche's case, we might be led to ask: is it perhaps because of the difficulty of the undertaking that a plurality of styles is discouraged in the humanities in general and in philosophy in particular? Indeed, it is already difficult to stabilize, in a way that is not awkward, a single style (as in the case of sports, which are highly codified, and in which very few develop a characteristic and admirable style); why — we might ask — should the effort be made, in philosophy, to stabilize so *many*?

This last imperative would seem to represent, if we want to put it in somewhat colorful terms, *an imperative to binge eating*, ordered mostly to a person who cannot, even if she would like to, go *on a diet*. Indeed, one may ask rather abruptly: what style is needed in philosophy? And, as always with respect to a question about "What style should you adopt?" that does not refer to the minimum requirements, it is difficult, if not impossible, to answer. Everyone will find their own answer.

In a very general way, however, we could say: in philosophy, especially in contemporary professional philosophy, which tends to conceive and represent itself as a strongly codified and rigid field (like any kind of sport), there are thinkers who have felt *a need for style* (both in the sense of an

exceptional style à la Federer, and in the sense of any particular artistic style, i.e., a set of choices to which an author remains adherent in the course of his work). In this sense, it won't matter how many and which styles are chosen, whether it is one or it is many, but it will matter *how* they are chosen, and *how much* effort is put into stabilizing them.

But let us proceed slowly, and try to recapitulate what has been said. In sports, we can talk about style in a minimal sense: in fact, as we have seen, whenever you play within the requirements you give birth to a certain style. Also in sports, we can speak of style in a more pronounced sense. This is the sense that tries to capture the performance of players like Roger Federer: in their case, in fact, we can speak of an *idiomatically* marked style. A style so personal that it can be attributed only and exclusively to a player — in our example, to Roger Federer.

However, we can ask ourselves how fundamental the maturation of such a marked style is in the field of sports. In fact, the ultimate goal of the players involved in a sporting event is to win. And, in this framework, the development of a marked style may seem merely ornamental, secondary. Moreover, as we have already observed, sports are highly codified practices, with fixed and rigid rules. As much as players are capable of flair and inventiveness, they must still operate within a highly regulated context.

This rigidity is not shared by the arts. In fact, we have observed how in cinema (and we could now add, for example, music) the rules of composition are less fixed and rigid. Here, too, there are minimum requirements to be met in order to be counted as directors, writers, and musicians, respectively. However, the fixed and rigid elements do not preclude the space for inspiration and inventiveness, or for the entire questioning of genres and practices, or for revolutions and experiments — or rediscoveries, and readjustments, of ancient ways of proceeding (think, to give just one example, of the use of the sonnet in contemporary poetry; while no one would think of reintroducing the use of old balls during soccer matches).

What about philosophy? Does philosophical activity lean more to the side of sports or to the side of the arts? In a note to the lectures given at Berkeley in 1983 and published in 1988 as *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, we find Stanley Cavell anxiously pondering his own intellectual journey, and wondering if he has come too late to the maturation of a certain sensibility on certain issues (I remain vague because the point of the question — i.e. Cavell's

meditations of his relationship to the writings of deconstructionist currents — does not interest us here). In response to his anxieties, or perhaps to placate them, Cavell makes an imaginative comparison: "If this [my intellectual development] were a race, I would bet on the hare every time. But if it is not, if there is not just one course, and indeed if we are not on the ground but at sea, the turtle may make sense".[15]

It is an interesting comparison between the hare and the turtle, and between their respective spaces of action: the ground and the sea. Although Cavell wanted to talk about something else (i.e., his intellectual development), we can use his imagery to represent the contrast between sports and the arts. The action spaces of sporting and artistic practices are different and can be compared to the ground and the sea, respectively. In Cavell's imagery, the ground is understood as a well-defined space for action, like a *playing field*, which can be used for a competition ("[where] there is just one course"). On the playing field, of course, I too would always bet on the sportsman, the hare. Who would I bet on instead in the action space represented by the open sea? I would be more tempted to bet on the turtle, on the artist. In fact, let us try to deepen the image of the sea suggested by Cavell.

The open sea, for some artists, is the blank sheet of paper they face, which can provide them with the support for adventure or, on the contrary, suck them into a whirlwind of uncertainty and frustration. In the case of the arts, we can imagine the "blank sheet" syndrome — while sports bring with them other syndromes, but not the "blank sheet" syndrome.

Cavell's account gives the last word to the turtle. As I, too, gave the last word to the artists in my introduction. Does this move represent an invitation, however implicit, to consider philosophy as an artistic practice? That is, a less rigidly codified and structured practice than, say, sports? I would be tempted to make such an invitation myself, but I think it would not do justice to the philosophical field. Thinking of philosophers' compositions as artists' compositions, in fact, can be misleading. As Bernard Williams wrote in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (2000), there must be something in philosophy that counts as "getting it right".[16] There must be some minimum

---

[15] S. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 17.

[16] B. Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, edited by A. W. Moore, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 180.

requirement here, as in other fields, that differentiates philosophical writing from novel, musical, and film writing. We can call it, for now, 'the truth claim of philosophy'.

"There are many ways to tell the false, and only one way to tell the truth", thunders a famous adage, risking hitting us and razing to the ground what has been built up so far. If there is only one way of telling the truth, in fact, why bother to encourage the philosophers to build and stabilize their own style? Wouldn't we be asking the philosopher for something futile? Something comparable to style in sports (as in tennis, a conception of style as "icing on the cake")? Any fan, in fact, would forgive their team for a bad game, or a standardized, unremarkable game, if that game led the team to victory. "Winning isn't important, it's all that matters", as one reads on some banners at stadiums or hears in informal conversations about sports, from mere observers or assiduous practitioners.

And yet, Williams, after having set the minimum requirement of getting it right, surprises us by claiming that, in philosophy (as in many other humanistic endeavors, it is implied; the title of the lecture is in fact 'Philosophy *as a Humanistic Discipline*') there are many ways to get it right.[17] But there is more, because Williams's judgment is not only descriptive, but also normative: *as many ways of getting it right as possible* should be encouraged in philosophy. Does this mean that — to return to Cavell's image — the philosopher becomes a turtle? Immersed in the sea of possibilities and free to move up and down, back and forth, straight ahead and to the side, at will? Some, in the twentieth century, wanted philosophy to disown its own sphere, and open itself to the infinity of its possible ways of being. Others, instead, like Williams and Cavell, have tried to pursue a "truthful path" without renouncing experimentation with different modes of expression in order to pursue it. Without giving up encouraging everyone to cultivate their own individual style. Without renouncing themselves (and discouraging others) from finding their own way, their own path, as only an artist can find it. By trying and experimenting, listening and following their own voices, and ultimately, "sticking to a set of choices stabilized over time" (to use most of the words from my first proposal).

---

[17] "Getting it right has to be in place, and the same thing goes, indisputably, for clarity and precision. But there is more than one kind of all these things — for instance, more than one thing that can count as getting it right: it depends on what it is". *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline, cit.*, p. 203.

By renouncing the formation of a style, in fact, one renounces an aspect that, historically, and since the beginnings of philosophy, has been ousted from the philosophical realm: I am talking about *persuasion*. Truth and falsehood have been assigned to logic and not to rhetoric. But there is a weapon that can be used not only in support of falsehood, but also in support of truth — and this weapon is that of rhetoric, aimed at persuasion. There is a need for all possible resources to be brought together so that a speech with "truthful claims" can sound persuasive. And, in order to persuade others (and ourselves as well), we do not have a set of defined rules, but we must choose the aspects that seem most appropriate, that convince us the most, and try to stabilize them.

To take just one example: to talk about morality, and "how one should live", I will need to draw on every plausible consideration to sound convincing; and the aspects I choose to dwell on, whether to give much space to psychological exploration of fictional narratives, or detailed accounts of anthropological studies, or whether I decide to rely largely on my own experience, is a set of choices that is up to me, and me alone, to put together. No set of defined and precise rules — such as those provided by a university education, or professional training — will be able to show me the safe way to accomplish the task at hand. I will need my own style.

Overview Table

	Choice	Awareness	Constancy	Style
Conquered style ("idiomatic")	Almost entirely	Almost entirely	Almost entirely	Yes
Examples	Everyday life: *a certain person after a long therapy*			
	Sports: *Roger Federer*			
	Arts: *Stanley Kubrick and Wes Anderson*			
	Philosophy: *Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams*			
Practiced style	Partial	Partial	Partial	Yes
Examples	Everyday life: *ordinary person*			
	Sports: *any professional tennis player*			
	Arts: *any professional artist*			
	Philosophy: *any professional philosopher*			
Doomed style ("sewn on")	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal	Yes
Examples	Everyday life: *any form of life*			
	Sports: *any amateur tennis player*			
	Arts: *any amateur artist*			
	Philosophy: *any amateur philosopher*			
Style "without pattern"	Maybe	Maybe	No	No
Examples	Everyday life: *alien form of life*			
	Sports: *totally unpredictable tennis player*			
	Arts: *indecipherable artistic work*			
	Philosophy: *indecipherable philosophical work*			

Emersonian Perfectionism

In what follows, I will concentrate on the conquered or idiomatic style in philosophy. This category, in fact, is especially useful since here one can find philosophers who are well aware of their own style; who have explicitly reflected upon style, and its formation, and also its role in philosophical activity. Thus, they can represent a privileged place for the type of inquiry I would like to conduct. And, as the subtitle and preface of my dissertation already made clear, I would like to investigate here the work of philosophers-stylists such as Cavell and Williams.

In their critique of rules, in the fact that for them (as I just wrote) "no set of defined and precise rules — such as those provided by a university education, or professional training — will be able to show us a safe way" to talk about morality and how one should live, they are perfectionist authors. In the sense specified by Cavell's proposal of what he calls "moral perfectionism". Indeed, moral perfectionism is intrinsically a question of style. — Well, is it?

I will first try to account for the richness of Cavell's Emersonian perfectionist proposal with a few hints; then, I will show how some key points of this proposal are intertwined with questions of style.

A Tradition or Dimension of the Moral Life

What we mean by perfectionism is already difficult, what Cavell means by 'Emersonian Perfectionism' is a mess. In a good (Cavellian) way, though. Indeed, this is a huge issue for Cavellian interpreters, and there are various attempts to interpret Emersonian perfectionism in a systematic way;[18] here I want to take an unpretentious stance, because what I am interested in claiming is that no matter how we interpret Emersonian perfectionism, it will be a matter of style. In short, I have decided to recount Cavell's perfectionism through (as much as possible) Cavell's own words; this choice allows me to avoid suggesting that Emersonian perfectionism is a matter of style only if we accept some peculiar interpretation of what it is.

So let us open Cavell's book *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990), skip the *Preface and Acknowledgements* (around 40 pages!) and

---

[18] For a recent collection of contributions on this and related issues see the volume on Perfectionism and Pragmatism, edited by Piergiorgio Donatelli and Sandra Laugier: P. Donatelli and S. Laugier, edited by, "Symposia. 'Perfectionism and Pragmatism'", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, II-2, 2010.

jump to the *Introduction*. Let us hear the very first words that Cavell devotes to directly addressing the issue of perfectionism. Cavell engages in (what I counted as) seven consecutive attempts at encapsulating what he means when he writes 'Emersonian Perfectionism'. Let us try and schematize his proceeding:

1. First — even before we could grasp what he could mean by perfectionism — Cavell asks "Is Moral Perfectionism inherently elitist?".[19] How could we even begin to answer the question, when we don't know what he means? Fortunately, a first attempt to approach the meaning of perfectionism lies in the next sentence. Cavell writes: "Some idea of being true to oneself — or to the humanity in oneself, or of the soul as on a journey (upward or onward) that begins by finding oneself lost to the world, and requires a refusal of society, perhaps above all of democratic, leveling society, in the name of something often called culture — is familiar from Plato's *Republic* to works so different from one another as Heidegger's *Being and Time* and G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*".[20] From these words, it seems that by perfectionism Cavell means some vision of the self, of authenticity ("being true to oneself"); an authenticity, however, which is not so much to be discovered as cultivated, and which requires a rejection of conventional rules ("a refusal of society… perhaps above all of democratic, levelling society"), rejected in the name of something often called "culture".

2. Secondly, Cavell's concern shifts to conceiving a form of moral perfectionism, of the kind outlined, in ways that are not inherently elitist, but democratic. In short, he returns to the starting question ("Is Moral Perfectionism inherently elitist?"). In fact, taking the time to cultivate authenticity seems to exclude a whole section of the population, who do not have the luxury of thinking about these issues. Earlier we said that living is enough to acquire a lifestyle. Fine. But how many, among the living, wish to change their lifestyle? To acquire a (different) second nature? The elitist Heraclitus said: a minority; *hoi polloi*, the majority, prefer to live as if they were asleep, keeping their eyes closed, and letting the lifestyle of first nature sew itself onto them. But Cavell is not Heraclitus, and his concern is to devise a form of democratic perfectionism. As he writes: "That there is a perfectionism that happily consents to democracy, and whose criticism it is the honour of

---

[19] S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 1990, p. 1.

[20] *Ibidem.*

democracy not only to tolerate but to honour, called for by the democratic aspiration, it is a principal task of these Carus Lectures [*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*] to clarify".[21]

3. Third, Cavell speaks of "moral perfectionism" in relation to the history of modern moral philosophy. The course of this history, Cavell writes, has been determined by the set of texts by Hume and Kant and, "with numerous and persuasive exceptions in recent decades more than in the past", by the reigning theories of Utilitarianism ("the teleological theory founded on the concept of the good'") and Kantianism ("the deontological theory founded on the concept of the just").[22] From the perspective of these theories, for Cavell, the idea of moral perfectionism seems to be founded on what? On the idea of being true to oneself? This would seem to imply that the outlook of moral perfectionism places more emphasis on oneself than on others — indeed, caring primarily about the good or the right of others, of one's own society, seems to be actively disdained by the perfectionist view. (This sounds like Nietzsche, and it bears some affinities with Nietzschean themes.) In any case, the relationship Cavell wants the idea of perfectionism to have with moral theories in the history of modern philosophy is very specific. Perfectionism fills a space that such theories fail to appreciate. Thus Cavell writes:

> Perfectionism, as I think of it, is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one's society — strains of which run from Plato and Aristotle to Emerson and Nietzsche, and pass through moments of opposites such as Kant and Mill, include such various figures as Kleist and Ibsen and Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, and end at my doorstep with Heidegger and Wittgenstein.[23]

Calling perfectionism "a dimension or tradition of the moral life" allows Cavell to do two things. First, it allows him not to restrict the concept to the sphere of *a theory* of moral life; second, it allows him to identify a series of texts, with various filiations to one another, that can form relationships and kinship links in that mass of texts called 'Western thought'. It is also relevant that

---

[21] *Ibidem.*

[22] *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, cit.*, pp. 1–2.

[23] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 2.

we speak of *thought* and not just of philosophy. This fact determines the subsequent choice of authors taken as examples as representative of this 'dimension or tradition': Plato and Aristotle, Emerson and Nietzsche, Kant and Mill, Kleist, Ibsen, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. (If this list seems random, or forced, one should not be alarmed. Shortly afterwards, Cavell will provide an even more extensive and even more chaotic list.)[24]

4. Let us turn, however, to his fourth move. The list just sketched out raises a scruple in Cavell. How come women are absent from this list? For Cavell, however, in addition to enumerating texts representative of perfectionism in Western thought, it seems to be just as important to speak of a "perfectionist relationship". About this relationship, writes Cavell, there is certainly no shortage of women in the roll call. First of all, women as actresses. As a film lover, Cavell is keen to note from the outset that this type of perfectionist relationship has been explored in film, for instance "in certain comedies that exemplify relationships that make sense morally — to the extent that they are credibly happy — not in terms of Utilitarian or Kantian lines of thought, but in terms, I am learning to say, of Emersonian Perfectionism".[25] Here Cavell openly reveals his cards: at this stage of writing, and of performance, he is as well placed as we are. He knows as much as we do. To speak of "Emersonian perfectionism" is an attempt to do justice to these moments, these relationships (among which the conjugal ones stand out, between man and woman, husband and wife: either in their happy realization, i.e. in marriage; or in their unhappy break-up, as in melodramas, in which the woman's voice, and its negation, constitutes the main theme of the narration, whether filmic or operatic). Such moments and relationships are ignored by moral theories like Utilitarianism and Kantianism, but are significant to the view that Cavell is learning to call "Emersonian Perfectionism".

5. But let us return to Nietzsche. The philosopher of 'the great contempt', as is well known, had and expressed many controversial and disreputable political ideas to a modern, contemporary sensibility. (As Bernard Williams wrote: "Although [Nietzsche] moved beyond the conception of the world as aesthetic phenomenon that is prominent in his major, early, work devoted to the Greeks, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he did not move to any view that offered a coherent politics. He himself provides no way of relating his ethical and psychological insights to an intelligible account

---

[24] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 5.
[25] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 2.

of modern society — a failing only thinly concealed by the impression he gives of having thoughts about modern politics that are determinate but terrible".)[26] In Nietzsche's case, the doubt may legitimately arise that the search for culture goes hand in hand with a Heraclitean contempt for the masses. Yet, what interests Cavell is to focus on the Nietzschean textual datum; in particular, to investigate a Nietzsche who is certainly close to individualistic claims, but also to the democratic claims that are present in Emerson. This is Cavell's fifth move. In particular, Cavell is interested in the way in which John Rawls branded a passage from Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator*, a book heavily influenced by Emerson, as 'a strong version of perfectionism'. These are the sentences from Nietzsche quoted by Rawls: "Mankind must work continually to produce individual great human beings — this and nothing else is the task. ... For the question is this: how can your life, the individual life, retain the highest value, the deepest significance? ... Only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens. (As cited in A *Theory of Justice*, p. 325, footnote 51)". And this is Cavell's comment: "This sounds bad. Rawls takes it straightforwardly to imply that there is a separate class of great men (to be) for whose good, and conception of good, the rest of society is to live".[27] For Cavell, unlike Rawls, there is a more moderate and contextual way of reading these sentences by Nietzsche.[28]

6. Here I am only interested to note that Cavell's efforts include — as sixth move — linking these passages from Nietzsche to a passage from Emerson quoted earlier in *Schopenhauer as Educator*: "A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits".[29] Again the word *culture*. Cultivating oneself, according to Emerson, will eventually lead not only to changing oneself, but to "revolutionizing the entire system of human pursuits". How is this possible? In a parenthetical remark later in the Introduction of *Conditions Handsome and*

---

[26] B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993, p. 10.

[27] *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, cit.*, p. 49.

[28] Cavell writes "In Nietzsche's meditation, the phrase, 'Only by living for the sake of the rarest and most valuable specimens', continues with the words 'and not for the sake of the majority'", *ibidem*. But on this issue see especially James Conant's essay on *Schopenhauer as Educator*: J. Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator" in *Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 181–257.

[29] R. W. Emerson, "Circles", in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Stephen E. Whicher, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1957, p. 172.

Unhandsome, Cavell comments on Emerson's quoted passages like this: "(The 'degree' Emerson speaks of in prophesying the revolutionary effect of a 'new degree of culture' is not necessarily of a higher intensity, but of a shift in direction, as slight as a degree of the compass, but down the road making all the difference in the world)".[30] When change happens, however small and at the moment almost imperceptible, in the long run (like the deviation of a compass point) it will make all the difference in the world to the direction of one's life. The sixth move by Cavell consists thus in preserving the term 'perfectionism' in the absence of an emphasis on the idea of perfectibility, but with an emphasis on the significance of each instant. As he writes:

> I keep the old-fashioned word 'perfection' in play for a number of reasons. An important reason, for me, is to register Emerson's sense — and Freud's, not to mention Plato's — that each state of the self is, so to speak, final: each state constitutes a world (a circle, Emerson says) and it is one each also desires (barring inner or outer catastrophes). On such a picture of the self one could say both that significance is always deferred and equally that it is never deferred (there is no later circle until it is drawn).[31]

7. We have come to the last characterization I would like to mention of "Emersonian perfectionism" according to Stanley Cavell. As we have seen, Cavell is not interested in speaking of "Emersonian perfectionism" in terms of a theory, but rather in terms of a "dimension or tradition" of the moral life; not only that, but also in terms of a "dimension or tradition of thought". In what sense? Here Cavell specifies what he means:

> A definition of what I mean by perfectionism, Emersonian or otherwise, is not in view in what follows. Not only do I have no complete list of necessary and sufficient conditions for using the term, but I have no theory in which a definition of perfectionism would play a useful role. I emphasize accordingly that an open-ended thematics, let me call it, of perfectionism, which I shall adumbrate in a moment, is not to my mind a mere or poor substitute for some imaginary, essential definition of the idea that transcends the project of reading and theorisation I am undertaking here. This project, in its possible continuations, itself expresses the interest I have in the idea. That there is no closed list of features that constitute perfectionism follows from conceiving of perfectionism as an outlook or dimension of thought embodied and developed in a set of texts spanning the range of Western culture, a conception that is odd

---

[30] *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, cit.*, p. 31.

[31] *Ivi, cit.*, pp. 3–4.

in linking texts that may otherwise not be thought of together and open in two directions: as to whether a text belongs in the set and what feature or features in the text constitute its belonging.[32]

Cavell therefore intends to speak of perfectionism as "an open-ended thematics", which can be approached through the project of reading and thematizing particular authors. A fundamental requirement, for Cavell, in order to investigate further this dimension of thought, is to approach some specific texts closely. After that, the task will be to identify certain textual characteristics that make these texts suitable candidates for the label 'perfectionist'.

A Question of Style?

Let us pick up the threads of the discussion above, strand by strand.

1. For the purposes of my investigation, this something, in the name of which one rejects a levelling society in order to find oneself and one's own form of authenticity, can be called *style*. That Cavell uses the term 'culture' here, in any case, is quite significant. It seems that Cavell is referring to a certain idea of second nature examined in the first part of this introduction. *Finding one's own style* may thus be a fairly faithful rewriting of what Cavell means in this first characterization of the term "moral perfectionism". Finding: thus searching for, admitting to possessing nothing, and feeling lost; one's own: "a certain idea of being true to oneself"; style: "culture" or second nature.

2. Cavell's concerns about the elitism of the perfectionist perspective are also connected with stylistic issues. Indeed, finding one's own style may turn out to be an aristocratic ambition: an aestheticizing, and isolating ambition that separates the individual from his or her community of reference. For Cavell, however, the challenge is to think of this need for separation and distinction — which can also be rewritten as: *seeking a difference in style* — that is compatible with the conditions of a democratic society. For example, with the fact that style is not just what an author separately achieves, but what readers are then able to recognize, and from which they can derive philosophical satisfaction.

3. The authors identified by Cavell, as a first approximation of the "dimension or tradition" he intends to illuminate in *Conditions*, pose stylistic issues in themselves. In fact, they are both philosophers and literary figures (and, in a larger list, Cavell will also include film-makers).[33]

---

[32] *Ivi.*, *cit.*, p. 4.
[33] See the already cited list (in note 24) that one finds at page 5 of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.

Sticking to Cavell's very first micro list, however, one might ask: what unites authors as different as Emerson and Nietzsche, or Heidegger and Wittgenstein, with authors such as Kleist and Ibsen, or Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw? And one answer may very well be: they all seem to be authors who think that style matters to their way of thinking.

4. Let us now turn to the fourth point. How do we do justice to moments in our lives that seem to be forgotten or systematically ignored by moral theories such as Utilitarianism and Kantianism? This, too, is a matter of style. Finding a mode of expression that succeeds in accounting for these perhaps more elusive but certainly significant aspects of our lives is a goal of the Emersonian perfectionist perspective. Why, on the other hand, are utilitarian and Kantian theories unable to account for these aspects? Because they address them as if the style adopted to deal with them does not matter (as will be seen, in more detail, in Chapter Two).

5. Moreover, we have seen how Cavell feels the need, in order to discuss what Rawls called Nietzsche's "strong version of perfectionism", to dwell on the textual datum. Feeling this need reveals a perception to the problems of style that Nietzsche himself felt. As Bernard Williams, among others, has written, it seems particularly difficult to extract theories from Nietzsche's philosophy: "Nietzsche's text [...] is booby-trapped not only against recovering theory from it, but, in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory".[34] To feel the need to return to the textual datum, therefore, reveals an affinity with the sensibility of a philosopher-stylist like Nietzsche.

6. Part of this operation of returning to Nietzsche's text brings Cavell, as we have seen, to read Emerson's aphorism, "A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits". This new degree of culture resonates with the earlier analysis on "discovering a style". By changing style, by acquiring a (different) second nature, we change direction. We modify some of our natural reactions. As in the example of the psychoanalyst and the growth of the neurotic patient analyzed in the first part of the introduction: we leave behind useless past suffering and live better. — Fine, but does this growth happen all of a sudden? As psychoanalysis teaches, the process of growth is long, tortuous, difficult, made up of detours, backward marches, hesitations,

---

[34] B. Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982-1993*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 66.

insecurities and die-hard fears. Yet, *it happens.* From time to time, slowly, you can change (provided you want to). Here is one sense of that Emersonian "instantly" ("A new degree of culture would *instantly* revolutionize the whole system of human pursuits"). When change happens, however small and at the moment almost imperceptible, in the long run (like the deviation of a compass point) it will make all the difference in the world not only in the direction of one's life — but also in one's philosophical style.

7. Finally, a final word on Emersonian perfectionism as "a dimension or tradition" of thought. Cavell's effort seems to be directed precisely at capturing a style of thought common, though in marked diversity, to authors belonging to the Western tradition. This perfectionist style of thought is certainly difficult to capture, but not impossible. It will require reading efforts along with the analysis of certain stylistic criteria found in texts belonging to what Cavell calls "an open list". Thus, the analysis of philosophical style will prove central in order to better explore this dimension of thought and the list of works that (by adopting a certain style) manage to express it.

In the next chapter, I intend to interrogate more closely, through the analysis of two major works by Cavell and Williams, the label of "Emersonian perfectionism"; moreover, I intend to draw from Cavell's reflections in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* some criteria of an "Emersonian perfectionist" philosophical writing. I believe that this kind of writing, highlighted by Cavell, responds directly and indirectly to certain problems of style, in relation to philosophy, which we have only begun to glimpse in this introduction and which I will examine in more detail throughout the dissertation. Thus, from these attempts to characterize "moral or Emersonian perfectionism", I believe it has emerged how it is a philosophical position (concerning principally, but not exclusively, the field of moral philosophy) that depends upon a posture, *upon a style*. And — as made clear in the preface — I am interested in the notion of philosophical style, not just the notion of literary style in philosophy; not just the style of philosophers, but the style of philosophers who self-consciously write philosophy on the basis of the condition — not obvious,

not accepted by everyone —[35] that style matters, that style has a philosophical import, that style makes a philosophical difference, that one's style changes one's philosophy. This is why I start from Cavellian perfectionism, a moral philosophy whose realization depends upon a question of style, and this is what Cavell thinks himself.

Moral or Emersonian perfectionism is thus the ideal place for my investigation. Cavell is openly an Emersonian perfectionist (that is both a moral and a stylistic position). But so is Bernard Williams, as I will show in the next chapter. For the purposes of the whole dissertation, I will need two perfectionists: they are suitable candidates because they are similar yet different in interesting ways; as we will see, they seem to share a common metaphilosophy, but they also seem to be different in terms of their style. I wanted to draw a comparison between stylists of philosophy, thus I chose two Emersonian perfectionists. Only through a comparison will I be able to show — behind similar outward appearances — some subtle differences.

How shall I proceed operationally? First, I will establish some criteria of Emersonian perfectionist writing (Section 1.1), understood as a philosophical style. Then I will try and see those criteria embodied in Cavell's and Williams's work (Sections 1.1. and 1.2.). Finally, I will draw out from these criteria some problems of style in philosophy (Epilogue to Chapter One) and, in the following chapters (Chapters Two, Three, Four and Five), I will discuss these problems in Williams and Cavell (showing similarities and differences, showing what can be done with style in philosophy). The trajectory of Chapters Two, Three, Four, Five will be better explained in the Epilogue to Chapter One. Now let us delve even deeper into Emersonian Perfectionist issues.

---

[35] For example, by all those analytical philosophers who write under the dictum criticized by Bernard Williams that, in philosophy, one must 'get it right first, and add the style afterwards': "One should not approach philosophical writing in the spirit of the analytic philosopher who (in actual fact) said to another when they were trying to write a book together, 'Let's get it right first and you can put the style in afterwards'". See *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline, cit.*, p. 205. More on Williams's criticism in Chapter Three.

1. Chapter One: Emersonian Perfectionist Writing in Philosophy

1.1 *The Claim of Reason* (1979)

Introduction

The aim of this section is to show that a certain type of perfectionist writing — namely, what Cavell calls "Emersonian" — has its own reasons in philosophy. These reasons have to do with the reasons of style, and particularly philosophical style. A style that makes a difference in philosophy. Indeed, as I suggested in the previous introduction, Emersonian perfectionism is inherently a matter of style. In this section, I will identify some of the criteria for this style and go on to see if they are found in Cavell's own work, particularly in *The Claim of Reason* (1979).

Let us start with the word itself, perfectionism. Ordinarily, perfectionism is understood to be that hypercritical attitude that doesn't want to let go of a certain work, or a certain task, until it has reached a perfect stage. The term often has a negative meaning. Within the attitude of the perfectionist lies the temptation to never finish, to never get to a point. Where does this temptation come from? From the requirement that every single part of the work must be perfect, complete; you cannot deliver anything until that stage is reached.

One of the first things that struck me in Cavell's book on perfectionism, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, was this: his choice to retain the term *perfectionism* itself, despite its negative meanings. Cavell is explicit in listing the dangers of what he calls the "false and distorted forms of perfectionism", and in this regard he writes: "They seem to be everywhere these days, from bestsellers with the titles *Love Yourself* to the U.S. Army's television advertisement, which has for its slogan: 'Become all you can be'".[36]

The problem with bestsellers like *Love Yourself* is that they falsely reassure one about one's current condition: 'It's okay the way you are. You just have to love yourself', they seem to say. While Cavell's perfectionism — borrowed from Emerson's — encourages one to feel ashamed of one's current stage. At the opposite extreme of blindly loving oneself, on the other hand, lies the U.S. military's motto: 'Become all you can be'. I imagine this admonition uttered by the sergeant in *Full Metal Jacket*: soldiers must be ashamed of their current stage, and they must become all that they can be

---

[36] *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, cit.*, p. 16.

— translated: *all that their sergeants would like them to be*. If the first form of perfectionism was false (because it did not encourage you at all to change, to improve, but only patted you on the back), the second form of perfectionism is distorted. The result may still be to change, to transform the subject: but at what price? It would be too hetero-directed a change, and therefore contrary to the *self-reliance* encouraged by Emerson. As Cavell writes in the third lecture of *Conditions*, 'false perfectionism equals false autonomy'.[37] And what would be true autonomy? To give oneself one's own law? Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism does not encourage solipsistic autonomy at all; rather, this more "natural" form of perfectionism is inherently *relational*: we find our way through the help of various figures we encounter along our way. They can be friendly figures, who *stimulate us* to bring out our voice; but they can also be enemy figures, who *challenge us* to bring out our voice. This perfectionist relationship, conceived in terms of mutual provocation (literally, from the Latin, *to draw out the voice*), can also take place, thanks to the invention of human language, *through writing*, through one's style.

Emersonian Perfectionist Writing: Five Criteria

It is in this sense that Cavell is interested in understanding the characteristics, the criteria, of what he calls an Emersonian perfectionist text. This is a kind of text in which, as he writes again in *Conditions*'s third lecture, "the attention to every word, that attractive confidence in every word, which constitutes the character of perfectionist authorship, draws the reader onto another path — his own".[38]

So there is a seductive attention and care that, according to Cavell, spurs us to find our own way. Perhaps it makes sense to ask abruptly: "Is this a romantic myth? Of the genius's perfect work?" Yes, it is a romantic myth. But Cavell's interest lies in the transfiguration of romanticism enacted by Emerson. It is therefore useful for me to briefly outline some of the main criteria Cavell draws from Emerson and uses to characterize his perfectionist writing:

1. a prose in which the boundaries between literature and philosophy are blurred;

2. metaphorical and allegorical precision;

---

[37] "Moral Perfectionism [is] the rescue from a false perfectionism, call it a false autonomy". *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, cit.*, p. 121.

[38] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 123.

3. the revival of embodied figures of philosophical dialogue, such as the friend (or, at the opposite extreme, the scoundrel);

4. the restitution of our repressed thoughts;

5. the importance of — or, as Cavell occasionally expresses it, *the emphasis on* — every single word.

All these criteria (along with several others) are functional to Emerson's main aspiration according to Cavell: *the aspiration to represent the human*.[39] Emerson's prose is charged with accounting for our human condition. This is not a romantic task, but an ordinary task, within the reach of anyone: in fact, anyone can *write* (for the sheer pleasure and need to do so, and without the need to establish one's text as strictly literary or philosophical); anyone can dose the use of metaphors and allegories; anyone can assume the position of the friend or of the scoundrel; anyone can give voice to one's own repressed thoughts; and, finally, anyone can put an emphasis on his or her words.

We thus get to the heart of this section. When Cavell talks about the criteria of Emersonian perfectionist authorship he is certainly identifying *his own* prose as such. Certainly? After all, it is not so certain: Cavell could have identified a kind of canon, or canvas, of Emersonian perfectionists' texts (depending on the fulfillment of the reported criteria) and exclude his own from that list (of course, there are more mundane reasons for calling oneself out, for not including oneself in that list: avoiding vanity, narcissism, self-referentiality...). Yet, if there is one text by Cavell that seems to best meet the criteria mentioned above this is *The Claim of Reason*. Interestingly enough, *The Claim of Reason* risked being one of those perfectionist texts in the ordinary sense of the term: a text that was never born, over-postponed, hypercritical of itself in an almost obsessive way (like the *Philosophical Investigations*, judged unfit for publication by their own author). As is well known, *The Claim of Reason* has its origins in a doctoral thesis in 1961 — titled *The Claim to Rationality* — and then gradually fell victim to sporadic, extra-academic forays, forays that its author in 1979 would consider different 'roads'.[40]

There is one moment in particular in Cavell's autobiography, one of those turning and breaking moments that, speaking of another author, he would have called *perfectionist*, that I am interested

---

[39] This idea runs through *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, but is particularly detailed in the First Lecture, called *Aversive Thinking. Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche*.

[40] S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. viii.

in recalling here. In the rewriting of this moment Cavell is giving voice to his fears concerning the old and new roads of what would shortly be published as *The Claim of Reason* — fears primarily directed at the new part (and its coherence and continuity with the old part). The fears are expressed to his own psychoanalyst — a friendly Emersonian figure — who urges him thus: "Are you afraid that the manuscript is too bad or that it is too good to exist?".[41] Who would have thought of putting it in those terms?

It is a common experience of psychoanalysis to live in, and to respond to, such moments. It also has to do with *extremities*: if one is afraid that one's text is too bad, it may also be because, on that text, one is loading a lot of claims on oneself, one is identifying with it a lot. Who would dream of claiming that one's text is too bad if it does not even deserve that much importance or attention — if it is not uncomfortable or disconcerting, and in the first place for its author? One of the texts that Cavell includes in the list of Emersonian perfectionist writings is Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator.* Toward the end of the essay Nietzsche recalls a question from Diogenes the Cynic: "How can he be considered great, since he has been a philosopher for so long and has never *disturbed* anybody?".[42] The words of an Emersonian perfectionist text — exposing and bringing much of the human voice into play — are capable of disturbing someone, and primarily its author. For this reason, the temptation to censor oneself and not come out will be very strong. It took Cavell almost twenty years.

The Fulfillment of the Criteria: Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*

Now, in order to test *The Claim of Reason* in the light of what has been said about perfectionism, I have decided to go this way. I will refer to a single section in Part Four, the section on the figure of the Outsider, which was commented on and rationally reconstructed by Richard Moran in "Cavell on Outsiders and Others" (2011/12).[43] In this paper, Moran makes a remarkable effort to trace the passages of the Cavellian argument. Moran's role for my section is as follows: I believe that his paper

---

[41] S. Cavell, *Little Did I Know. Excerpts from Memory*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010, p. 191.

[42] F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (1837), ed. D. Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 193.

[43] The paper is collected in R. Moran, *The Philosophical Imagination. Selected Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 123–135.

is one of the best rational reconstructions of an important section of such an intricate part as is the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason*; now, if even this reconstruction misses something important as far as style is concerned (something that makes a difference to the understanding of Cavell's text) then it will indeed be true that too much is lost in focusing only on the "philosophical" while leaving out the "style". I believe that to be the case, and one of the purposes of this section will be to go and check whether that is indeed the case.

Now, there is no better way to begin than to summarize very briefly the passages of Moran's argument and see what is left out. Roughly speaking, the passages are these. Within the so-called 'skepticism of the external world', at some point, we are obliged to imagine the figure of an Outsider. Occupying a specific and fallible position, we can — indeed, we must — imagine an Outsider position, better than our own, who can access knowledge of the outside world. For example, when our senses deceive us (because we are sleeping or hallucinating), this outside position, better than ours, will be able to tell us how things really are out there. Within the so-called 'skepticism of other minds', too, we can imagine such a figure. When we try to imagine it, however, things get complicated. How will he know whether we ourselves are human beings? Endowed with a mind? *Could he show us that no, we really are not*? Similar to the Outsider invoked in the context of skepticism about the outside world telling us that no, we are not really having that experience but rather dreaming?

As soon as we invoke the figure of the Outsider for the problem of other minds we realize that he will necessarily have to occupy an intermediate position: he cannot be *too external* (so external as to question the existence of our own mind); but he cannot be *too internal* either, otherwise it would identify with us and not be other than us. As far as other minds are concerned, therefore, the Outsider takes on different, more human contours, and we realize that we occupy this position *vis-à-vis* one another.

This is a *relational matter*: I come to know as much about you as you wish me to know; by talking, you will be able to show me your mind, and any judgment I make about you will have to take this fact into account. I will not be able to claim to know anything about you, about your mind, without you having a say in this knowledge (which you can reject, deepen, deflect or accept…). This is why, ultimately, Moran's paper is titled "Cavell on Outsiders and Others", *plural*. There is no absolute, privileged vantage point from where I can access your mind.

To use an expression of Cavell's: there is no *psychonomy*.[44] This Cavellian linguistic invention is particularly felicitous, and Moran himself dwells on the impossibility — in our form of life — of such a science (a so-called psychonomic science). This is a first clue, a first criterion that seems to be satisfied with what Cavell means by Emersonian perfectionist writing. The image of psychonomy — and, expanding it a bit, the possible various psychonomers[45] — seems to be endowed with the metaphorical and allegorical precision that Cavell will come to appreciate so much in Emerson.

Yet, Moran does not make much of this imagery. It seems that the rational argument is much more important in this section of Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* than the images found by Cavell to describe the human condition. But, apart from the passing reference to the passage on the image of psychonomy, Moran's commentary — in order to report Cavell's argument as best as possible — omits a whole range of other textual elements. As he makes explicit in a note from the outset, Moran does not dwell on the fact that the text of *The Claim of Reason* proceeds in an uninterrupted dialogue between different voices and is subject to constant correction.[46]

The very use of the word *correction* brings to mind the expression used by Cavell to describe one of the two voices in the *Philosophical Investigations* (the other being that of *temptation*).[47] And if we pay attention to how Cavell's text is structured, we notice that the dialogues between "I and you" (or, at least, this is how I will call the two voices in *The Claim of Reason*) take a progressively clearer form. The voice of you is the voice of someone who *refuses*: for instance, refuses to believe that skepticism is really a problem; that a certain interpretation of the skeptical dynamic leads to tragedy; and, again, refuses to understand that the knowledge of others that an Outsider may have with respect to other minds is, as Cavell writes, provided by literature.

Let us read directly from *The Claim of Reason*:

---

[44] *The Claim of Reason*, cit., pp. 474–475.

[45] "Is it possible that psychonomy, or rather certain psychonomers, already exist, and have existed [...]? Could such knowledge be possessed by just a few — call it the discovery of the social bonds, or bondage; of the (outer) laws of association, let us say — who for some reason cannot communicate them to the rest of us?". *Ivi, cit.*, p. 475.

[46] *The Philosophical Imagination*, cit., p. 123.

[47] S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (1969), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 71.

— For you the claim that the Outsider's knowledge of us is the study of literature is as safe as it is obscure. Since you read the problem of the other as the problem of acknowledging one's relation to the other; and since you claim that the history of the failures of these relations is a history of skepticism and of attempts to overcome skepticism; then since fiction can safely be said to be "about" human relationships, sure enough fiction is about acknowledgment and its limitations; and then if one accepts your characterization of tragedy as the failure of the best case of acknowledgment, one has already accepted it as your characterization of skepticism. And indeed, aren't your "best cases" really just cases of love? And everyone will concede that dramatic fictions tend to be dramas of love, and of course, if you like, dramas of the avoidances of love, even of the horrors of it. — But then what I have said should contribute to an understanding of why dramas are about love, and what it is they provide us with a knowledge of, and why this knowledge takes the form it does, viz., of acknowledgment, or of its impossibility. And of course I am counting on what I have said to raise the question of whether, and of how, we know differences between the writing of literature and the writing of philosophy.[48]

This is quite a long passage, and dense, but I think it is significant. In particular, it is representative of the philosophical style of the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason*. One first thing that can be observed is that the two voices, apparently, do not seem so different. They talk about the same themes. The first voice downplays them, or questions them; while the second voice recovers them, reclaims them. Another thing that can be noted is that if we try to imagine the same portion of the text spoken only by the second voice, I think it would sound rather dogmatic and enigmatic. The last sentence of the quoted text is illustrative: "Of course I am counting of what I have said to raise the question of whether, and how, we know the differences between the writing of literature and of philosophy". Why this claim? What is more, introduced by an "of course"? It does not seem at all clear why, following the doubts raised by *the voice of refusal* (the voice of you), this seems an adequate response. Yet, at some time it may make sense to ask: what answer will ever be adequate for a voice that rejects, refuses, and more or less consciously *represses*?

In fact, the doubts and reservations expressed by you are articulated in a perfect argumentative style (we read: "since", "since", "since", "then if"...). What is more, these doubts and reservations follow another long passage in *The Claim of Reason*, an illuminating one in light of the book's entire journey. Let us read it:

---

[48] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, pp. 477–478.

> One text from which to decipher the significance of our suffocating from the half-swallowed apple of knowledge is Kleist's 'Marionette Theater'. Is being human exactly to be incapable either of swallowing it or spitting it out? Is the gasping of the human voice, say sobbing or laughing, the best proof of the human? Or best picture, i.e., mask? To swallow once for all would be to live always within ordinary language-games, within the everyday; to spit once for all would be to exist apart from just that life, to live without. In particular, to live without the human voice (e.g., without appeal, without protest).[49]

Again, we see a metaphorical and allegorical precision at work in Cavell's text. The allegory of the tree of knowledge, and its half-swallowed fruit, is taken seriously by the author of *The Claim of Reason*, who uses it to speak of the temptation to know everything (in the allegory: swallowing the fruit) and the prohibition to know nothing (in the allegory again: spitting out the fruit). Of these two extreme temptations, and of the search for a balance between them, Cavell finds evidence in Kleist's *Marionette Theater*. In order to be able to decipher the meaning and importance of these literary and philosophical texts together, philosophy will have to dispense with its own supposed purity and immerse itself in the river of literature.

Thus, we can observe how all five criteria of Emersonian perfectionist writing seem to be met: 1. the boundaries between literature and philosophy are effectively blurred, both at the level of the texts under consideration (e.g. Kleist's *Marionette Theater*) and at the level of the literariness of the Cavellian prose. This literariness is constituted (also) through the fulfillment of two other criteria: 2. the text carries with it a metaphorical and allegorical precision, aimed at illuminating different aspects of the human condition; 3. the text makes use of fictional dialogues between I and you (and we can see you as an Emersonian friend, with their doubts and scruples, but also always with their potential repressions). Thus, criterion 4 is also found to be fulfilled, as our repressed thoughts, in the polyphony of the Cavellian text, find space both in their repressive attempt and in their reaffirming moment. Finally, we come to the most difficult question: how to tell whether criterion 5, which seems to be of central importance, is being met? I believe that Cavell's self-declarations are not enough — he certainly wanted every word to count in the text of Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*, as we have already observed through the exchange in the psychoanalytic context and through the amount of years passed between the doctoral dissertation and the publication of the

---

[49] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 477.

book. These facts are certainly important in understanding the motivation for Cavell's writing, but not so much its *outcome*.

One way I found was to bring back passages from Moran's reconstruction of the Outsider section and to show what — if anything — is left out. And I have found that Moran did not dwell on the blurred boundary between literature and philosophy in Cavell's prose, on its metaphorical and allegorical precision, on the presence of different voices in it and on the restitution of our repressed thoughts. In a nutshell: Moran didn't pay close attention to *The Claim of Reason* as an Emersonian perfectionist text, i.e. as the expression of a specific philosophical style. This fact may be understandable given the narrow aims of Moran's paper: namely, to reconstruct the argumentation of the section on the Outsider in the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason*. But since we have now glimpsed the richness of this part of *The Claim of Reason*, we can better express an underlying doubt: isn't too much lost in leaving out these other aspects of Cavell's text and focusing solely on the argumentative side? Isn't it that perhaps every word counts? (And not just every argument counts?)

These questions directly call into question the fulfillment of the fifth criterion of Emersonian perfectionist's writing. In fact, from an Emersonian perfectionist point of view, one must pay extreme attention to every word written by the author. This fact could lead to a form of *radical perfectionism* (more radical than the Emersonian actually was): this form might read every attempt at reconstruction of a perfectionist text as a betrayal of the spirit in which it was written. I think Moran did not let these problems posed by a form of radical perfectionism stop him, in which every word counts so much so as to render any attempt at commentary impossible.

So let me again point out that Moran's reading of the section on the Outsider in *The Claim of Reason* does an excellent job in explaining and in interpreting a complicated and crucial part of the whole book. However, from an acknowledgment of the reasons of *a more moderate form* of perfectionism (like the Emersonian), one can add many more considerations, in addition to Moran's, in order to best grasp the effect of such a text as *The Claim of Reason*.

This is what I have tried to do in the present section, which had the aim of bringing one closer to acknowledging the reasons for an Emersonian perfectionist prose in philosophy. To put it rather crudely: what is lost if one doesn't pay attention to this dimension of Cavell's text? *Everything*, a radical perfectionist would say; *nothing*, an openly anti-perfectionist philosopher would say (such as

one for whom only arguments matter, and every other aspect of the text can be ignored or judged irrelevant). To both extremes I reply: *much* is lost, and above all, the heart of Cavell's philosophizing is lost. Namely, all the expressive means (both philosophical and literary) that Cavell has found to represent the human would be overlooked; these means make one feel, reading the text, the internal struggle of an *I* (that is, Stanley Cavell) with *his own* repressed voices.

Such dialogue is alive, constitutive, emerging from an internal tension within the writer, as in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The body of the author is present to us, carries with it a sense of *presentness*, and we are led to see it in its entirety, with all its fears and doubts, passions and emotions, but also with all its goals and motivations. Without paying attention to every single word of Cavell's text we will miss *all* of this, which certainly is not *all* we can learn from his philosophical writing, but it is certainly not *nothing*. It is *something*. As Richard Rorty wrote in his review of *In Quest of the Ordinary*: "Cavell sticks his neck out farther than any of the rest of us [professors of philosophy]. Who touches this book touches a fleshly, ambitious, anxious, self-involved, self-doubting mortal".[50] The philosopher — but also the human being — is present.

However, returning to the discussion of the fifth criterion: it seems impossible to meet this criterion incontrovertibly. Not coincidentally, this is precisely the moral of Cavell's reinterpretation of the the very concept of criterion in the first part of *The Claim of Reason*, in which criteria are precisely framed as contestable and subject to historical change.[51] The measure of the counting of each word in a text, similarly to the knowledge of other minds, is *relational* and *historical* (there are texts that stop speaking to certain epochs, or that start speaking very late).

Each word will be able to count if it will count in the first place for the readers (or if it will make them become writers: "A measure of the quality of a new text is the quality of the texts it arouses",[52] Cavell wrote in *The Claim of Reason*). Therefore, the readers have the last word. Cavell has merely put them in the position that every word *can* count — whether it *actually* counts will depend only on them, on us, and on future communities.

---

[50] R. Rorty, "Philosophy of the Oddball", *New Republic* (19 June), 1989.

[51] Particularly in the first part of the book, called *Wittgenstein and the Concept of Human Knowledge*.

[52] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 5.

1.2 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985)

Introduction

In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* one finds a list of contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy texts that Stanley Cavell put together for their anti-theoretical approach and their rejection of moralism. These texts are, as Cavell writes: "In addition to Murdoch's *Sovereignty of Good*, and Annette Baier's *Postures of the Mind* ... I think of the work represented in G. E. M. Anscombe's *Ethics, Religion, and Politics*, volume 3 of her *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Minnesota, 1981); in Cora Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit* (M.I.T. Press, forthcoming); in Philippa Foot's *Virtues and Vices* (Blackwell, 1978); in Alasdair Macintyre's *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame Press, 1984); in John McDowell's "Virtue and Reason", The Monist, 62, No.3 (1979); in Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard, 1985); and in Peter Winch's "Particularity and Morals", in his *Trying to Make Sense* (Blackwell, 1987)".[53]

Among these texts is Bernard Williams's *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy*. The question I want to answer in this section is: does a contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy text like *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy*, in addition to sharing anti-theory and anti-moralism, also share some interesting aspects of that Emersonian perfectionist writing described in Section 1.1?

My purpose, in this section, will not be to verify that Williams actually is an Emersonian perfectionist author. Rather, my purpose will be to justify the attempt to check whether he is. The point is that, after reading this section, one should be encouraged to go and check more closely whether he is, carefully and thoughtfully analyzing other works as well besides *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. What interests me here is to go and see whether, point by point, some of the criteria of Emersonian perfectionist writing are met by this book of Williams.

Let me recall that, in light of the elements Cavell returns to most often in *Conditions*, I have identified five:

1. a prose in which the boundaries between literature and philosophy are blurred;

2. metaphorical and allegorical precision;

---

[53] *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, cit.*, pp. xix–xx.

3. the revival of embodied figures of philosophical dialogue (such as the friend, or, at the opposite extreme, the scoundrel);

4. the restitution of our repressed thoughts;

5. the importance of — or, as Cavell occasionally expresses it, *the emphasis on* — every single word.

Blurred Boundaries between (Analytical) Philosophy and Literature

Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, as its author very frankly admits, is a work of "analytical philosophy". Yet, it is not interested in recognizing itself as such; just as it is not interested in recognizing itself as a representative work of anything. As usual with Bernard Williams, we must penetrate deeper into the details of his intricate prose to grasp the scope of these claims. "I do not care very much whether this work is regarded as analytical philosophy — I merely recognize that it will be":[54] Williams does not want to delineate *a priori* the scope of his writing, though he expects that, on a superficial level, his work will be labeled as "analytical philosophy".

But this does not mean that Williams should narrow the spectrum of his interests, or have a preconceived image of clarity. As an analytical philosopher, Williams commits himself to three things: *arguing*, *making distinctions*, and using *moderately plain speech*.[55] However, as he himself admits at the end of the *Preface*: "[In the book] there are many things that are obscure though I have tried to make them clear. I can acknowledge this with more assurance than I can that some things are obscure because I have tried to make them clear in this way, but that is no doubt true as well".[56]

No doubt? Admitting from the outset his own "human stain", his own individual way of coloring the subject matter under examination, Williams does not give up — to use Cavell's terms — attempting to *represent the human*. According to Cavell, this purpose is directly pursued by "Emersonian perfectionist" prose, which does not give up a marked, individual form of *expressiveness*. This individual expression charges itself with representing the human because, in the first place, it is charged with *representing itself*. (And, as Emerson writes, only by giving voice to

---

[54] B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), London, Routledge, 2011, p. xvi.

[55] *Ibidem.*

[56] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, *cit.*, p. xvii.

one's innermost thoughts can one speak to all — only by representing the human that you are will you succeed in representing the human in general.)[57]

But, then, how should we take Williams's declaration about not being interested in any kind of representativeness? Let us take it literally, that is, let us read it in its entirety: "It is not merely that my account of the subject will be different from one given by someone else (that must presumably be so if the book is worth reading at all), nor is it a question of how representative it will be, but rather that I shall not be concerned all the time to say how representative it is".[58]

What Williams is claiming is not that he is not interested in the representativeness of his work. He is simply not interested in lingering on that aspect. Without our perhaps realizing it, perhaps on a first reading, Williams in this passage of *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy* goes further: every book that makes sense to read, according to him, must bear a different, individual mark than any other. It must affirm itself as individuality. In doing so, he will be able to say something interesting and important ('important' is a key word in *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy*, one of the most repeated in the entire book; there are 132 occurrences in all) about the human condition. Thus, it is this individual mark that blurs the line between philosophy and literature in this book. What, from one point of view, is clearly a work of analytical philosophy, from another point of view is also (more obscurely) an individual attempt to account for the human condition, in written form.

Moreover, Williams placed an aphorism by Camus as an epigraph to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* that also seems to allude to this fact: "Quand on n'y il a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner un méthode". Here, the *method* of the philosopher, and particularly of a certain image of the analytical philosopher, is contrasted with *character*. Possessing character is something much more complex than following a method; it requires different attention to the selection of one's words and one's way of proceeding than a simple application of a method.

Yet if this opposition between character and method seems reminiscent of the opposition between literature and philosophy, it is certain that the prose of *Ethics and the Limits and Philosophy* does not simply affirm one of the two poles while denying the other; rather, it brings them into dialectical relationship with each other, often criticizing the unfounded claims of a certain

---

[57] R. W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance", in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, *cit.*, pp. 147–167.

[58] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, *cit.*, p. 3.

philosophical methodology (in moral philosophy, for example, of certain "Styles of ethical theory"; hence the title of a chapter in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*)[59] with the construction of one's own character, with reference to the reasons of one's individual experience.

Metaphorical and Allegorical Precision

Reading it in detail, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* also turns out to be a text that is very attentive to what Cavell has called "a metaphorical and allegorical precision" (although, perhaps, this is not immediately apparent; but, in fact, none of the five criteria has *immediate* relevance with Williams's work).

For my illustrative purposes, I have decided to dwell on only one image, to which Williams returns more than once in *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy* and whose use he investigates even the indirect implications. This image is that of the Kantian moral law. Williams reads it together with the other famous Kantian image, that of the kingdom of ends, and is interested in showing the weaknesses of both, as he observes that they derive from a common tendency: that tendency on the basis of which, as he writes, "morality demands a voice, then supremacy, and at least ubiquity".[60] The fact that morality demands a voice in our lives is only reasonable; but that it first achieves supremacy and then ubiquity is not so much so.

Deepening a felicitous insight from *Moral Luck*, written out of the uncomfortable implications of the image of the kingdom of ends, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Williams dwells on the metaphorical and allegorical implications of the image of the moral law. In this respect he first writes: "The moral law is more exigent than the law of an actual liberal republic because it allows no emigration but it is unequivocally just in its ideas of responsibility".[61] And then again: "Another consequence of the fiction of the moral law: ... it is as if every member of the notional republic were empowered to make a citizen's arrest".[62]

These two consequences of the "fiction" of the moral law come out into the open when we take the image involved seriously, and we follow it precisely in all its metaphorical and allegorical strength —

---

[59] *Ivi, cit.*, pp. 79–102.

[60] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 43.

[61] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 197.

[62] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 214.

or, as in this case, in all its weakness. In *Moral Luck* Williams had already written: "The world, certainly, as a kingdom of moral agents, has no particular claim on my presence or, indeed, interest in it. (That kingdom, like others, has to respect the natural right to emigration)".[63]

Williams's ability to read in detail the implications of these images can lead us to become aware of this fact: that, without our realizing it, some philosophical options can seduce us because of their rhetorical power. The flip side, however, is that we may well abandon them at the very moment we are shown their rhetorical weakness. Williams will write in *Making Sense of Humanity* (1995):

> The present picture is rather of a [ethical] world in which everything is, if you like, persuasion, and the aim is to encourage some forms of it rather than others. This is not a technical task, like clearing a radio channel of static. It is a practical and ethical task, like deciding who can speak, how and when.[64]

As far as our ethical life is concerned, it is a matter of being able to understand what forms of persuasion should be encouraged, "who can speak, how and when". And, as Williams reminds us, this is not a technical task; it is a practical and ethical task, in which our understanding will be helped by how we can imagine who will be in the best position to speak about our condition.

For example, the conception of the moral law does not speak for us: where by *us*, here, is meant a certain kind of human being who cares about a form of freedom that leaves no room for the *supremacy* and *ubiquity* of a certain view of morality, which together suffocate the individual with their unnatural demands; which, however, as Williams (and Nietzsche before him) reminds us, have a natural origin, for example in resentment and fear.

Williams thus concludes that: "The fiction underlying the blame system ... can do many bad things, such as encouraging people to misunderstand their own fear and resentment — sentiments they may quite appropriately feel — as the voice of the Law".[65] Deepening the image of the moral law, and, conversely, what a human and ordinary way of relating to a political law entails, helps us to understand — and, even more, *to feel* — that the moral law exerts disproportionate, supernatural claims, beyond all politics and jurisprudence, on *us*.

---

[63] B. Williams, *Moral Luck. Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 12.

[64] *Making Sense of Humanity*, *cit.*, p. 149.

[65] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, *cit.*, p. 215.

The Revival of Embodied Figures of Philosophical Dialogue

As for the satisfaction of this third criterion, by contrast, there is only one passage, quite explicit and significant, in which dialogue enters directly into the prose of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. This is Chapter 2, "The Archimedean Point". Here Williams imagines a rationalist voice contesting him, one that would like to arrive at a rational justification (an Archimedean lever, from the chapter's title) capable of convincing anyone, even the fanatic, so dear to a certain moral philosophy (typically, the Nazi, a figure that has haunted, for example, the thinking — and the life — of philosophers such as Williams's teacher, R. M. Hare). It is a figure that has ancient origins, beginning with Plato himself, who gives it body in the figure of Callicles. Williams writes: "What is unnerving about him ... is something that Plato displays and that is also the subject of the dialogue: he has a glistening contempt for philosophy itself, and it is only by condescension or to amuse himself that he stays to listen to its arguments at all".[66] And it is at this point that Williams inserts direct dialogue, thanks to the typographic use of em-dashes:

> —That is not the point. The question is not whether he will be convinced, but whether he ought to be convinced.
> —But is it? The writers' note of urgency suggests something else, that what will happen could turn on the outcome of these arguments, that the justification of the ethical life could be a force. If we are to take this seriously, then it is a real question, who is supposed to be listening? Why are they supposed to be listening? What will the professor's justification do, when they break down the door, smash his spectacles, take him away?[67]

The last sentence, in its compression, turns out to be particularly effective. The first voice (which I have called "rationalist") turns out to be the voice of a generic "professor". The question Williams asks can be read rhetorically or not. The rhetorical reading suggests only one answer: what will the professor do when they (the fascists, the fanatics, who act in groups, and, as Williams never ceases to remind us, are among us) "break down the door, smash his spectacles, take him away?".

Nothing, nothing can be done. In the face of these three concrete, brutal actions, it would be foolish to imagine the professor in an attempt to convince his aggressors. Yet Williams's question, if

---

[66] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 26.

[67] *Ibidem*.

left open, may suggest just that. Perhaps the only way to make the dogged rationalist see, to show him that it is not possible to give a justification for ethical life "from the ground up",[68] is precisely to stage it. To make him enter not only into dialogue with these figures, but into contact with them. I imagine that this paragraph hurts those who carry that kind of hope for philosophy; but it can certainly do some good, insofar as it will lead them to recognize the limits of their enterprise.

The Restitution of our Repressed Thoughts

The penultimate criterion of "Emersonian perfectionist" writing to be seen fulfilled in the prose of *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy* calls into question a psychoanalytic term: repression.

Can it be said that the writing of this text gives us back our repressed thoughts? I think so, and let us see how. Although in the body of the book Williams is mainly interested in criticizing the unfounded claims of some moral theories (utilitarianism, contractualism and Kantian morality), in the last chapter he is keen to emphasize that by morality he means something that affects (almost) all of us: "Morality is not an invention of philosophers. It is the outlook, or, incoherently, part of the outlook, of almost all of us".[69]

The chapter is entitled "Morality: A Peculiar Institution", recalling an expression used to euphemistically describe slavery in the United States of America.[70] Thus, it is a certain form of moralistic thinking — of which we can end up trapped, more or less consciously, almost all of us — that exerts a control and a repression similar to that exercised by the institution of slavery. In this last case, the greatest form of repression is achieved when the philosopher himself, or more generally any reflective person, becomes convinced that slavery is something natural and justified — thereby silencing the equally natural impulses to judge it as just a form of oppression full stop. By freeing us from this form of repression, Williams can be said to restore our repressed thoughts. How, then, is this operation (or, rather, liberation) accomplished through writing?

---

[68] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, cit.*, pp. 32 and 224.

[69] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 194.

[70] It is worth mentioning that the word 'peculiar' means both 'strange' and 'special/particular to'. The Southern politicians using that phrase meant, among other things, that their form of slavery was an essential feature of their special form of life (as idealized in sentimental works such as *Gone With the Wind*).

This is a difficult question. As with the discussion of the other criteria, I will focus on a single example to show this effect (sought and achieved) of Williams's writing. Let us read directly from one of the last paragraphs of "Morality: A Peculiar Institution":

> Once we have ceased to believe in Kant's own foundation or anything like it, we cannot read this experience in this way at all. It is the conclusion of practical necessity, no more and no less, and it seems to come "from outside" in the way that conclusions of practical necessity always seem to come from outside — from deeply inside. Since ethical considerations are in question, the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others. In this respect, the morality system itself, with its emphasis on the "purely moral" and personal sentiments of guilt and self-reproach, actually conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual.[71]

What this paragraph suggests to us is that the system of morality, "with its emphasis on the 'purely moral' and personal sentiments of guilt and self-reproach" represses the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual. I have used the word 'represses' as a rewriting of 'actually conceals', as I believe they can be lumped together here in their intent to silence a dimension of our ethical experience.

What Williams seems to mean, in his compression, is that by internalizing to such an extent the moralistic drive (which is forgotten, repressed, as a drive that comes from outside) the individual isolates himself and feels nothing but his own guilt and self-reproach. He finds himself trapped in an illusion (another term repeatedly used by Williams): that there is no way to escape the obligations of the morality system.

A way does exist, however, and it is Williams's task to expand the vision — and perception — of such a trapped subjectivity. He intends to give it back its thoughts and its freedom, which are constructed in relation to the ethical life of the actual external world (and in its mechanisms of shame, social mechanisms; and not exclusively in those of guilt, moralistic and individual ones). There is indeed a way to escape this "peculiar institution", and it consists in looking outside: at how people, with more or less reflection, actually live, appreciate, value, hate and love. Williams writes further:

---

[71] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 212.

In truth, almost all worthwhile human life lies between the extremes that morality puts before us. It starkly emphasizes a series of contrasts: between force and reason, persuasion and rational conviction, shame and guilt, dislike and disapproval, mere rejection and blame. The attitude that leads it to emphasize all these contrasts can be labeled its purity. The purity of morality, its insistence on abstracting the moral consciousness from other kinds of emotional reaction or social influence, conceals not only the means by which it deals with deviant members of its community, but also the virtues of those means. It is not surprising that it should conceal them, since the virtues can be seen as such only from outside the system, from a point of view that can assign value to it, whereas the morality system is closed in on itself and must consider it an indecent misunderstanding to apply to the system any values other than those of morality itself.[72]

One reason that can lead to repressing our thoughts is that we do not judge them to be "pure enough". And it is precisely this need for purity — with all the dirty tricks one devises to get the impression that it has been achieved — that is unmasked by Williams in the final pages of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. What better way of doing this than through writing? A writing that is itself dirty, individual, an expression of Williams's own *confidence*, which puts all his rhetorical skills into motion to complete his work of unmasking. Morality is called "a deep misconception of life":[73] neither more nor less, with a rhetorical force capable of freeing us from the unfounded claims of those who seek to suppress the noxious influence that the quest for purity, for total justice (in short, according to Williams, morality) has instilled and continues to instill in us.

The Importance of Every Single Word

This brings us to the last criterion: the importance of every single word. There is a more superficial and a deeper sense in which I see this criterion satisfied by Williams's writing. Let us start with the former. When reading him, one has the impression that 'there is no extra word' in his writing. How could one re-write a Williamsian passage and preserve the meaning? Indeed it seems impossible. While with other authors, and texts, one has the impression that this is not the case. The very first sentence of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* might show what I have in mind: "This book is principally about how things are in moral philosophy, not about how they might be, and since I do

---

[72] *Ivi, cit.*, pp. 216–217.

[73] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 218.

not think they are as they should be, some of it consists of criticism of present philosophy".[74] Right from the start, the book embodies the criterion according to which every word matters, leaving us with a feeling of clarity but also of wonder — we have the impression of encountering a philosopher who carefully crafted his thought and expressed it, with no extra words, in the very first line of his book.

Another way, somewhat deeper, to see how this criterion is met is to look at the three hopes expressed in the *Postscript* to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*: they concern truth, truthfulness, and the meaning in an individual life.[75]

Williams writes that it is important to keep in mind that the natural sciences can coherently aspire to objective truth (within the framework of what he called "an absolute conception of the world").[76] It is therefore good for the philosopher to keep in mind the progress of the sciences, their objective truths, if one does not want to end up like those 17th-century critics who criticized scientific innovations primarily motivated by fear and superstition. This, however, is only the first hope, and if there is a sense for which every word counts — or is important — in the text of *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy*, it is not this. (Then again, *Ethics* is configured as a philosophical text, not as a scientific text: it must certainly pay attention to the scientific advances it reports on, but, in turn, it is not aspiring to the kind of objectivity proper to the sciences).

The second hope is closer to the "perfectionist Emersonian" sense according to which every word counts. To make a long story short: every single word is capable of representing the human. And those who, like Williams, encourage forms of truthfulness do indeed seem to meet this requirement of "Emersonian perfectionist" writing. Indeed, when one seeks to be truthful one tries, with every resource of oneself and with every effort, to present oneself as sincerely and as accurately as possible. Of course, truthfulness, understood as a disposition of the self, may disappoint those (such as ethical theorists) who are seeking an objectivity analogous to that aspired to by the sciences; but this is nothing more than a mistake of calculation on their part. As Williams writes: "To suppose that, if their formulations [of the ethical theories] are rejected, we are left with *nothing* is to take a strange

---

[74] *Ivi*, cit., p. xv..

[75] *Ivi*, cit., p. 220.

[76] B. Williams, *Descartes. The Project of Pure Inquiry* (1978), London, Routledge, 2005, p. 223.

view of what in social and personal life counts as something".[77] "To count as something". This is a revealing expression of Williams's efforts in this book. They have been directed toward making the book as much as possible *somebody's* book.

Let us return, then, to where we started. In contact with the individuality represented by Williams's text, we are encouraged to seek our own. Indeed, this is the third hope of the book: the meaning of an individual life. Avoiding what Cavell would have called "false and distorted" forms of perfectionism Williams does not give us simple, expendable recipes on "how to live". He does, however, leave us — and this is just one among several important legacies of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* — the exemplarity of this very text. A text that, as he writes in the finale: "is enough unlike others, in its opacities and disorder as well as in its reasoned intentions, to [be] *somebody's*".[78]

In the original context of this quote, Williams was talking about a "meaningful individual life". Yet, I think his words do an equally good job of capturing the nature of his living text, in which every single word (even the most opaque and disordered) testifies to him.

---

[77] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, cit.*, p. 223.

[78] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 224.

1.3 Epilogue

A First Comparison

As we can see, in first approximation every single criterion of what Cavell called "Emersonian perfectionist" writing seems to be met by Williams's prose. What can be the scope of this fact? I think it is good not to overestimate it. Then again, as made clear, I have focused on very few instances (sometimes, as in the case of direct dialogue, one in the entire book) where the criteria are seen at work. And someone might legitimately ask: it is fine that the criteria are met, but how widespread are these elements of "Emersonian perfectionist" writing in Williams's text? More importantly: does it make sense to interrogate Williams's prose in light of a label that calls into question an author, such as Emerson, whom Williams himself hardly ever cites and who is not a direct reference for him? (I say direct because, given the influence of Nietzsche's writing for Williams's writing, there could certainly be indirect filiations).

I will answer these questions by summoning the work of Stanley Cavell. We had started with the question of whether there was more than just the rejection of ethical theories and moralism that united the philosophical perspectives of Williams and Cavell. Now, in light of Section 1.2, we can see that some of the elements that Cavell claimed to be particularly important to his personal view of philosophy (let us remember that the label "Emersonian perfectionist" is also an excuse to say "Cavellian") are found, albeit to a lesser extent, satisfied by Williamsian prose.

This is a (first) result, but it is also a research hypothesis. Its meaning and importance — its significance — will become clearer in the course of the dissertation. Let us see more specifically why, by directly comparing — though very briefly — the extent to which the five criteria are satisfied in the two philosophers. Let us go in order:

1. In his work, Cavell continually returns to the blurred boundary between literature and philosophy (as is well known, *The Claim of Reason* closes with the question, "But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?");[79] Williams, on the other hand, does not directly discuss the question of the boundaries between literature and philosophy in *Ethics*. He simply acts as if they are blurred. While keeping in mind, and declaring, that the

---

[79] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 496.

work will be seen *by most* as a work of analytical philosophy and that is all. To grasp the nuances one must enter inside the text; in Cavell's case, however, they are more apparent.

2. In terms of metaphorical and allegorical precision, however, I would go out on a limb. Williams is very good at capturing the metaphorical and allegorical implications of others' images. In this section, for reasons of space, I have left out many of Williams's other discussions that might have been relevant: such as his personal interpretation of the image of "the death of God",[80] or the absurdities shown in R. M. Hare's image of the "archangel"[81] or Sigdwick's "point of view of the universe".[82] In short, here Williams and Cavell really travel at a closer frequency than in the other criteria. One thing that can be noted, *en passant*, is that the metaphorical and allegorical precision, in Cavell's case, is very often expressed, if we think of *The Claim of Reason*, in the creation of actual pictures, narratives, stories and allegories; while Williams, in *Ethics*, is more schematic when he proposes his own of images and allegories. Think, in particular, of the 'hypertraditional society' thought experiment.[83] Very often, however (and the case of HTS is not to be excluded) this greater schematicity does not preclude the way to greater allusiveness. As in the passage where, speaking of the dangers of losing our ethical knowledge, Williams inserts an image like this, "But even if one grants value to traditional knowledge, to try to suppress reflection in that interest can lead to nothing but disaster, rather as someone who finds that having children has disrupted her life cannot regain her earlier state by killing them".[84] An insertion so sudden and unexpected as to be dazzling.

3. On the presence of the embodied figures of philosophical dialogue we have already touched upon. Here it suffices to recall how about 200 pages of *The Claim of Reason* (the entire fourth part) are interspersed with a direct dialogue between two voices, while the pages of *Ethics and Limits of Philosophy* host a single direct exchange between two contrasting

---

[80] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, cit.*, pp. 257–258.

[81] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 38. I talk about Williams's interpretation of the image of "the death of God" in Chapter Four, Section 2.1. See *supra* p. 130.

[82] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, cit.*, p. 260.

[83] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 158.

[84] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 187.

voices. The quantitative difference is significant and should not be overlooked. However, one should not be fooled too much by appearances. Indeed, Williams's text, though in a more indirect and oblique (more obscure) manner, overflows with voices and figures. There are, for example, those who are said to suffer from a "masochism of shame",[85] others who express their "weakness for prudence"[86] — many of the nuances of human expression, often weak and negative, are present and absorbed in Williams's prose. They are not given the last word but are given voice nonetheless.

4. The fourth criterion only accumulates an impression that I hope is by now clearer and more established: the amount of *direct* references to repression is scarce (if we take just the word 'repression' it is zero), but, if we read Williams's text more closely we notice that it is full of references, more or less obliquely, to what Cavell called (thanks to reading Emerson) 'the restitution of repressed thoughts'. Suffice it to note all the times Williams argues that morality *conceals* from us something important about our human condition. In any case, again, the measure of criterion satisfaction varies if one counts all those more oblique, indirect and allusive moments in Williams's prose. A prose that — by now you must have realized — unlike Cavell's is less directly metareflexive but, indirectly, surprisingly engaged in similar "battles".

5. The degree of fixation and neurosis about how much each word matters, for the authors themselves, and then for readers, is very difficult to measure. The editorial history of *The Claim of Reason*, for example, testifies to how much the author cared about (and was obsessively interested in) the importance of every single word in the fabric of that text. As for *Ethics*, however, one could say that its case is almost the opposite. Indeed, it occurred to Williams to reproach himself for not being sufficiently clear and comprehensive in his text, for being, even deliberately, too compressed and allusive. Perhaps, however, one can see at work the criterion of the importance of each individual word even in their *subtraction*. By the time of publication, in fact, Williams must have felt that the written words were sufficient, that they were enough, that they alone could take on the task of showing the effort for truth, truthfulness and meaning of an individual life.

---

[85] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 16.

[86] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 22.

I have preferred to go a bit further, to return to each of these criteria and to include some comparisons with Cavell himself because I think this parallelism can be instructive. In his rejection of *isms*, Williams would never have liked to be associated with a label. However, the comparison with Cavell showed us how much he is in tune with his work, with that kind of label, not only in his rejections (anti-theory, anti-moralism) but in his affirmations (satisfaction of the five criteria for an Emersonian perfectionist philosophical style). What is more, this exercise was once again a reminder of how much one can learn from Williams's writing *malgré lui*. If there is one thing that in fact I think came up again and again, it is that it may be wise not to take the reticence too simplistically. And if a smart way to continue to learn something from his work is to be helped by Cavell's grandiose (and risky) attempts to put his favorite authors under one label, I see no reason not to follow it.

A Road Map

In the next four chapters, I will investigate three problems of style that emerge from the five criteria of Emersonian perfectionist writing discussed in Section 1.1. and Section 1.2.

By "problems of style" I mean some questions that a philosopher may encounter in philosophical writing. One does not have to be an Emersonian perfectionist to run into stylistic problems in philosophy. In this sense, the problems of style that will be discussed in this dissertation will be much more general and widespread than those raised by Emersonian perfectionism in philosophy. However, to start off with the discussion of Emersonian perfectionism as a question of style revealed to be useful not just for the subsequent derivation of just *any* problems of style; it was mainly useful for the extraction of specific, and *deep*, problems of style. In fact, a philosopher could encounter many problems of style in one's writing and there could be problems that are less deep, more superficial, than those raised by the discussion of Emersonian perfectionist writing in philosophy. For instance, one could encounter various practical problems of style if one would like to publish as much as possible, or if one would like to connect with a predefined audience. These are practical or institutional problems of style that do not concern the present dissertation (trivially, because both Cavell and Williams obtained a permanent job in philosophy very early, and did not have to think about those tiresome and more practical issues). So it is just fitting that the discussion began with Stanley Cavell first and then continued with Bernard Williams. The former

philosopher, in fact, carries with him a sense of seriousness and of depth, of emotional intensity, and, for an author like him, the fact that he tackled problems of style in the deep sense is clearer, and more predictable. In the case of Williams, however, though there are some declarations of him on the importance of style, just from reading his own writing one would not immediately think or expect an analogous intensity and reflection on deeper problems of style like those that could be inspired by an Emersonian perfectionist attitude.

Even though the questions encountered are deep and not superficial, in this specified sense, I nevertheless call them "problems" because the name itself emphasizes the fact that these difficulties require some kind of resolution. And, more importantly, that they can be solved. Like mathematical problems, which may admit different solutions, in style problems what matters is that *a* solution is found. Then that solution may be more or less effective, of course, but, as in the best existential problems, admitting that you have a problem is half the solution. Talking about problems, thus, will also make it easier to consider the various resistances that have been exercised to these stylistic difficulties.

The way in which they have been ignored, avoided, or actively suppressed by some of Williams's and Cavell's contemporaries will, in fact, constitute a rather significant part of the dissertation: prominently, in Chapter Two, where Cavell's and Williams's polemical targets are criticized precisely because of their inattention to the problem of style posed by writing examples; more indirectly, but nonetheless present, in Chapter Three, when some possible resistances will be enumerated from considering the problem of style (i.e., that in philosophy every word matters) as really a problem. Finally, the concluding two chapters, and especially their introduction, will consider the doubts advanced by Cavell and Williams that, in contemporary times, only one type of philosopher is permitted, licit, and respectable in philosophy: the academic philosopher, guided by a professional, cautious, and serious super-ego. In response to this leveling of the figure of the philosopher, reduced to a single possible type, Cavell and Williams respond in a unique, personal, and idiosyncratic way (showing, once again, a *n idiomatic style*): Cavell constructing himself as a figure outsider to the strictly philosophical sphere, but in dialogue with it, from a human point of view and with a spirit that is playful and adventurous, intimate and psychoanalytic; Williams constructing himself as a figure independent of those who would have him as a strictly academic and professional philosopher, reflective and cautious, but also as a figure independent of those who

would have him instead as the exact opposite, the philosopher as a chaotic exceptional thinker, deep and inaccessible, emotional and contemptuous of any more institutional claims. The types of philosophers constructed by Cavell and Williams, moreover, thanks to the insights of Chapter Five, will be able to show how, in the final analysis, some problems of style have a strongly existential charge, in which at stake is not only the choice of a better or worse expedient, of a more or less and effective solution, but of an existence and a profession more or less worthy of being exercised or maintained. Having said that, let us go on to see, more specifically, the three style problems that I will investigate in the next chapters.

In Chapter Two, I will focus on the writing of examples by Cavell and Williams. In particular, I will do this through the analysis of two case studies, that is, two concrete cases in which these philosophers tried to solve this specific problem of style; and I will see how the use of examples is not a marginal or secondary aspect in both authors, but is central to their philosophical stance. In fact, the way in which the two philosophers wrote specific examples was built in open contrast to two philosophical outlooks of the time: the emotivism of Charles Leslie Stevenson and the utilitarianism of J. J. C. Smart. The problem of examples emerges directly from the first criterion of perfectionist writing, namely the blurred boundaries between literature and philosophy. In order to write examples that adhere to the complexity of moral life, in fact, both Cavell and Williams need a philosophical style somewhere between literature and philosophy. Only a compromise between the two registers allows them to adequately describe the moral issues at stake in philosophical reflection.

In Chapter Three, I will focus on what I have called the stylistic methods of Cavell and Williams. I understand as a stylistic method a systematic use of a writing style for philosophical purposes. In this chapter, the philosophical purpose investigated in Cavell and Williams is maximal: namely, to show that style matters in philosophy. This is why, pleonastically, Chapter Three speaks of *the* problem of style (and not just of one problem among others). The stylistic methods found and cultivated by Cavell and Williams in their philosophical production constitute an argument in favor of stylistic awareness — against those who believe that 'in philosophy one has to get it right first, and then add the style afterwards'. The problem of stylistic methods thus emerges from the main criterion: that is, from the fact that (in Emersonian perfectionist writing) every word matters. If every word did not count, in fact, one could add style later and lose nothing of relevance within

one's philosophical production. Cavell and Williams both think that style cannot be added afterwards, and that every word counts, and in this chapter we shall see why and how.

In Chapter Four, I will focus on the types of philosophers that Cavell and Williams embodied in their work. However, to succeed in this difficult task I will follow a rather indirect route. In fact, I will focus on two different fictional accounts that both philosophers chose as representatives of their own philosophical style.

In Cavell's case, it is Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*; in Williams's case, it is Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. I believe that from this analysis of the problem of types of philosophers, the differences between the philosophical styles of Cavell and Williams emerge well; such differences will be highlighted in particular in the Introduction to Chapters Four and Five. Moreover, the problem of the types of philosophers, precisely because of the way it will be discussed, i.e. through the analysis of two literary texts such as *The Purloined Letter* and *Rameau's Nephew*, will have links with both the criterion of metaphorical and allegorical precision and the criterion of the presence of embodied figures in the philosophical dialogue.

Finally, Chapter Five will be a quantitative chapter. I will take a closer look at the problem of the type of philosophers through a quantitative investigation. In Section 5.1, the investigation will focus on the use of parentheses in Stanley Cavell's work: through the results of this investigation, it will be shown how the fabric of Cavell's writing, thanks to parentheses, is enriched with a multiplicity of voices and tones, without which his philosophy would not be recognisable and would be severely impoverished. In Section 5.2., the investigation will instead focus on the analysis of the authors cited by Williams in two corpora into which his work can be divided: a more academic corpus and a more cultural one. Here, in brief, it will be shown how in the academic corpus Williams brings cultural elements, and how in the cultural corpus Williams does not renounce the academic guise. In short, he always finds a way to enter into a dialectical relationship with each sphere.

Interestingly, both parts of this final chapter will have a direct relation to one of the most elusive criteria of Emersonian perfectionist writing: namely, the fact that such a work gives us back our repressed thoughts. In the case of Section 5.1, we will see how Cavell uses that space to insert voices that he would otherwise have repressed from the philosophical work (voices and tones that generally tend to be repressed by more academic philosophers). In the case of Section 5.2, we will

see how Williams inserts cultural references into the academic work that risk being repressed by technicality and specialization; and vice versa, how he approaches the cultural work in the — somewhat unexpected — guise of the academic philosopher, rich in references to the professional philosophy contemporary to him. These two parts (Section 5.1 and Section 5.2) will yield an ending up to the difficulty of the problems of style addressed in this dissertation. Both, in fact, will show how crucial it is to combine quantification and interpretation in order to achieve interesting and comprehensive results regarding a philosopher's style. Moreover, these last two parts will be able to show the continuity (along with the various inevitable slippages) in the formation of marked and self-conscious philosophical styles such as those of Cavell and Williams; and to show, once again, their valuable use.

2. Chapter Two: Through the Examples

2.1 Stanley Cavell's Philosophical Style: A Case Study

Introduction

August 13, 2004

The claim to represent philosophy is unverifiable not because one lacks knowledge, but because in philosophizing one must not claim to know what others do not know or cannot know by bethinking themselves. (Quite obviously this is not a view of philosophy universally, I suppose not even widely, shared. I declare it as ancient and as still alive.) I offered Bernard the alternative of attributing his exasperation with Heidegger to Heidegger's arrogance and intellectual vulgarity, for example, to his routine disparagement of the assumed (underdescribed) superficiality of others, his repeated claims to profundity, his sometimes facile spirituality, and a coarse, perhaps lethal, inexactness in his treatment of examples.[87]

The passage quoted in the epigraph is taken from the intellectual autobiography of Stanley Cavell.[88] This is a segment of the memoirs in which Cavell recalls some conversations with Bernard Williams. Williams has expressed on several occasions, in person with Cavell or in writing in his texts, skepticism towards Heidegger's philosophical style. In the passage quoted, Cavell wants to try to deepen Williams's resistance to Heideggerian philosophy, and suggests some reasons. The use of examples plays a central role in the critical description of Heidegger's philosophical style.

Cavell's idea is that a "coarse and inexact" use of examples can reveal the philosophers' baseless, and often fantastic, claims — and show their "intellectual arrogance". A close analysis of the examples will thus be able to show the degree of concreteness that a philosopher places in the subject under examination: a subject that can be examined in a "coarse and inexact" way, as opposed to a precise and accurate way. The goal I set myself in this section will be to show how a certain vision of philosophy — and of morality — favors the use of a certain type of examples. In this sense, the philosophical style adopted by Cavell becomes an expression of his position on the claims of philosophy and the nature of morality, a position that is matured in the essays that make up the

---

[87] *Little Did I Know*, *cit.*, p. 501.

[88] B. Williams, *Essays and Reviews* (1959-2002), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 179–184.

third part of *The Claim of Reason*, written between 1955 and 1961 (and then republished in the 1979's complete work). All of Cavell's subsequent production will be influenced by the approach cultivated in those years — an approach that bears the influence of J. L. Austin, whose teaching is developed by Cavell in unexpected and original ways.

Throughout this section, I will observe how in Cavell the role played by examples is able to show the effectiveness of a certain way of philosophizing; of a concrete and imaginative philosophical style. By contrast, I will observe how in Charles Leslie Stevenson (1908-1979), supporter of the so-called "emotive theory" and representative of a common and widespread way of thinking in ethics, the role played by examples can show the difficulties of a more theoretical and abstract philosophical style. Or, at least, this is Cavell's idea: an idea that I will describe starting from his statements on the subject and from the analysis of the philosophical style that he adopts as opposed to approaches — such as Stevenson's — which he strongly rejects. Cavell is convinced that by learning from mistakes and recognizing the shortcomings (for example) of Stevenson's theory, we are able to understand better what we need in order to develop a realistic view of morality.

(The Basis of) Morality according to Cavell

The third part of *The Claim of Reason* is called *Knowledge and Concept of Morality* and is the oldest part of Cavell's book. In fact, the four chapters that make up this third part — *Knowledge and the Basis of Morality, An Absence of Morality, Rules and Games, The Autonomy of Morals* — had already been presented (in a different and less extensive form) in the doctoral dissertation that Cavell delivered to Harvard in 1961, called *The Claim to Rationality. Knowledge and the Basis of Morality* (it can be observed that the subtitle of the PhD thesis is the same as the first chapter of the third part of *The Claim of Reason*).

It is worth asking immediately, and directly: what does Cavell mean by "morality"? Towards the end of *Knowledge and the Basis of Morality* Cavell presents, on an intuitive level, the proposal of what he means by morality:

> Morality ... provides one possibility of settling conflict, a way of encompassing conflict which allows the
> continuance of personal relationships against the hard and apparently inevitable fact of

misunderstanding, mutually incompatible wishes, commitments, loyalties, interests and needs, a way of mending relationships and maintaining the self in opposition to itself or others.[89]

Cavell's guiding intuition is deliberately left broad and poorly defined. Despite this, we can identify some fundamental traits he attributes to the concept of morality: it is understood as a possibility of resolving the conflict, *one* among many; a way of keeping social relations in balance, of reconciling (more or less laboriously, more or less tragically) the relationship of the self with the community, and of the self with itself. The interesting thing is that Cavell is well aware of how morality represents only one way of conceiving, and of shaping, social and individual relationships. Indeed, there are several alternatives to the world of morality:

> Other ways of settling or encompassing conflict are provided by politics, religion, love and forgiveness, rebellion, and withdrawal. Morality is a valuable way because the others are so often inaccessible or brutal; but it is not everything; it provides a door through which someone, alienated or in danger of alienation from another through his action, can return by the offering and the acceptance of explanation, excuses and justifications, or by the respect one human being will show another who sees and can accept the responsibility for a position which he himself would not adopt. We do not have to agree with one another in order to live in the same moral world, but we do have to know and respect one another's differences.[90]

Morality is seen by Cavell as an area of perennial negotiation, in which people enter into relationship with each other, interact, harm and apologize, ask for reasons and demand, and sometimes obtain, respect and recognition. The last sentence of the quoted passage strongly underlines — thanks also to the use of the formula "We do not have to", which indicates an advice, or a recommendation — Cavell's proposal; a proposal that, as we will see, is by no means the only possible one, but is the one that is regarded by Cavell as the closest to our ordinary life.

Entertaining moral relationships with others is made possible by a fact of the human condition: what Cavell calls our "separateness". (It is interesting to observe how Bernard Williams, in *Persons, Character and Morality* (1981), expresses a similar thought, quoting with approval a passage by

---

[89] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 269.

[90] *Ibidem*.

John Findlay: "The separateness of persons [...] is [...] the basic fact for morals".)[91] Faced with separateness, different reactions are possible: violent, loving, manipulative, repressive... Morality is distinguished from these reactions in that, in the moral sphere, the separateness of the other is respected; moreover, there is no need to agree with each other so that one can, as Cavell writes, "know and respect one another's differences".

However, one can ask: why does Cavell feel the need to remember that "we do not have to agree with one another to live in the same moral world"? Who has ever denied this fact? On closer inspection, some philosophical theories. In particular, Cavell focuses (in *An Absence of Morality*) on the emotivist theory of Charles Leslie Stevenson (1908-1979). Since individuals are unable to reach a definitive agreement on their actions and behaviors (the possibility of conflict and disagreement being always open), Stevenson comes to argue that any action that can change the attitude of others must be understood as *moral*. In this "emotivist" theory, morality is based solely on the ability to influence the emotional state of other people, to have an effect on their emotions and attitudes.

At this point, it may be useful to recall the title of the first chapter of the third part of *The Claim of Reason*: *Knowledge and the Basis of Morality*. *The Basis of Morality* is the English translation of an essay by Schopenhauer that Cavell quotes at the beginning of the first chapter. In this essay Schopenhauer puts forward a skeptical doubt: what if our moral maxims were nothing more than "stilted [*stelzgebeinet*] maxims, from which it is no longer possible to look down and see life as it really is with all its turmoil [*Gewühl*]? And that, as Schopenhauer continues, they "make a great display in the lecture-rooms"? In this case, in order to give morality a foundation again, shouldn't we "first [...] look about them a little among [our] fellow-men"?[92]

The interesting thing is that Professor Stevenson (as Cavell sometimes calls him, perhaps not without Schopenhauerian echoes) adopts a similar aspiration: he wants to look at how people *actually* live, and to describe their moral interactions with analytical neutrality and without moralizing the area under investigation. Let us therefore concentrate on the foundation of morality

---

[91] *Moral Luck*, *cit.*, p. 5. See J. Findlay, *Values and Intentions*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1961, pp. 235–6.

[92] A. Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, trans. A. B. Bullock, London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1903, p. 134.

proposed by Stevenson himself — a foundation which Cavell believes to be, in reality, an *emptying* of what we ordinarily mean by, and experience as, morality.

An Absence of Morality (and of Style)

We observed how Cavell's view of morality does not concern itself with the question of agreement or disagreement because, according to Cavell, living in the same moral world is possible regardless of whether agents reach an agreement or not. Stevenson is not of the same idea: the perception of the impossibility of reaching a definitive agreement makes him conclude that, in the moral sphere, the only thing that matters is the possibility of making people change their attitude.

Stevenson has two kinds of disagreements in mind: a *disagreement in beliefs* and a *disagreement in attitudes.* This distinction is based, in turn, on "an envious comparison"[93] (as Cavell calls it) between science and morality. According to Stevenson, disagreement in science relates to beliefs and, in order to dissolve it, evidence can be invoked; in morality, however, the disagreement would concern attitudes but, in order to dissolve it, no evidence can be invoked.

At stake is therefore the diversity of agreement that one can hope to obtain in science and morality. According to Cavell, this is "an envious comparison" because the hope seems to be unbalanced on the side of science, and does not lean at all on the side of morality. In this image (an image that, as Cavell writes, "controls Stevenson's writing entirely"[94] — Wittgenstein would have said: "holds it captive"[95]), science is conceived as a model of rationality, a model to be admired (and envied) for the kind of agreement it can get.

One of the moves Cavell uses to question the solidity of this image is to ask how fundamental "beliefs" are in scientific practice. In fact, science is used by Stevenson as a model of rationality not only for its ability to arrive at stable and shared beliefs, but for the very modalities that it puts in place to get there: it is our commitment to certain procedures, and methods of argumentation, that makes scientific practice a model of rationality. But if this is the case, Cavell argues, in the moral

---

[93] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 262.

[94] *Ivi*, *cit.*, p. 259.

[95] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte, London, John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2009, §115.

sphere one can *commit* in a similar way in order to keep certain procedures and methods of argument alive and effective.

However, the hope of reaching an agreement plays a different role in the moral argument. In a moral confrontation there can be several cases in which the positions diverge strongly, and in which no appeal to the facts will be relevant; in these cases — to put it crudely — it is possible to take Luther's position: "Here I stand, I can do no other". While in the scientific field it would make no sense to reply to someone who claims to have seen a goldfinch, and who reports all the characteristics that we ordinarily attribute to a goldfinch: "For me it is not a goldfinch".

Furthermore, Cavell does not like the analogy with science not only because it is constructed in an "envious" way, but also because it encourages the choice of examples of moral judgments such as: "You must do so and so", "You must keep promises", "This is good" — examples where appealing to facts is irrelevant (often being *imperative* formulations) or where we fail to understand how an agreement could ever be reached. (While the equivalent scientific examples would be: "All metals expand when heated" or "There will be an eclipse at that place and time"; cases in which appealing to the facts is certainly relevant and in which a collection of evidence can help you reach an agreement.) At this point Cavell wonders: is it not perhaps that examples (or "maxims raised on stilts"?) such as "You must keep your promises" or "You must do so and so" or "This is good" were chosen precisely because of the (previous) assumptions about the nature of morality? Let us consider an example from Stevenson, the first to catch Cavell's attention:

> A (speaking to C, a child): To neglect your piano practice is naughty.
> B (in C's hearing): No, no, C is very good about practicing. (Out of C's hearing): It's hopeless to drive him, you know; but if you praise him he will do a great deal.
> [...]
> Here B is not opposed to the general direction of A's influence on C, but wishes to change the manner in which it is exerted. Examples of this kind are so common, and illustrate the hortatory effect of ethical judgments so obviously, that it is difficult to understand why emotive meaning in ethics was not recognized in the earliest theories. B's last remark serves to point out the consequences of the sorts of influence exerted.[96]

---

[96] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 252.

Reading this example by Stevenson, Cavell wonders: is this a situation in which a moral encounter is represented? What concept of morality is presupposed by the choice of such examples? The answer is provided by Stevenson himself when he states that: "*Any* statement about *any* fact that *any* speaker considers likely to alter the attitude of the other can be considered a reason for or against a moral judgment".[97]

In this case, the reason for the moral judgment is to praise the child (even if his musical practice is currently weak, or neglected) versus scolding him. The latter solution, in fact, is less likely to lead to a change in the child's attitudes. Now, since Stevenson claims that his proposal is not intended to revolutionize our understanding of morality but, in fact, is intended to describe "what we all believe" (our ordinary, if unreflective, understanding of moral conduct), Cavell sets out to show how Stevenson's proposal actually operates not only a revolution of the ordinary concept of morality, but an *emptying* of it. The polemical verve that Cavell will employ to show this is motivated by the fact that Stevenson's readers have criticized some details of his proposal, accepting however the basic approach (an approach that Cavell considers widely shared, particularly in some of his fundamental assumptions, such as the distinction between science and morality). However, as Cavell writes, "much of what Stevenson says is true ... but what is true in Stevenson is not true of morality".[98]

In what sense? What are the aspects of Stevenson's theory that are not true of morality? According to Cavell, it is precisely the core of his proposal that is not true of morality: that is the idea that any aspect of our moral life (which Stevenson does not regard as a possibility among others, but which crushes entirely on practical life) is permeated by the attempt to influence the attitudes of other people.

Now, this is by no means a description of how human beings actually live; instead, it is a radical subversion of how they have — at times — lived up to now: that is, *morally*, respecting and recognizing the separateness of others. Indeed, it can be seen that if every aspect of our practical life becomes moral, and every aspect is penetrated by the attempt to manipulate others, then in Stevenson's world there will no longer be any room for morality as we normally understand it (or,

---

[97] C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (1944), New Haven, Yale University Press, 1958, p. 329.

[98] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 275.

at least, as Cavell understands it: even if, it must be said, a world in which one *sometimes* apologizes is more likely than a world in which one *always* tries to manipulate others).

Therefore, according to Cavell, Stevenson's vision offends our (and in a parenthesis he adds: "my") *moral sensibility*:

> [Reading Stevenson] the discouragement ... comes ... from being told that one man may treat me morally and yet act only in terms of his attitudes, without necessarily considering me or mine. If this is so, then the concept of morality is unrelated to the concept of justice. For however justice is to be understood — whether in terms of rendering to each his due, or in terms of equality, or of impartiality or of fairness — what must be understood is a concept concerning the treatment of persons; and that is a concept, in turn, of a creature with commitments and cares. But for these commitments and cares, and the ways in which they conflict with one another and with those of other persons, there would be no problem, and no concept of justice. One can face the disappearance of justice from the world more easily than an amnesia of the very concept of justice.[99]

As the latter, rich quote showed us, Cavell believes that Stevenson's proposal causes an amnesia of the very concept of justice, understood as a concept connected to the *treatment of people* — people with *commitments* and *cares*. Not only that, the amnesia also concerns the concept of morality, and it is for this reason that Cavell entitles the chapter *An Absence of Morality*. It is in this part that Cavell articulates his most heartfelt criticism of another of Stevenson's examples. It is a strongly combative criticism. And, recently, Avner Baz declared that it was excerpts of text like this which showed him the ethical-existential dimension of Cavell's philosophical style.[100] I will report in full Stevenson's example and in full — although it is a very long passage — Cavell's answer. Going into the details of the "storm of questions" that Cavell addresses to Stevenson will allow us to carefully examine his philosophical style:

> A: You ought to give the speech, as you promised.
> B: That is unfortunately beyond my power. My health will not permit it.
> This example deals with the consequences of a judgment's influence. A is endeavoring to influence B to give the speech. If B's reply is true, then whatever influence A's judgment may have on attitudes, it will

---

[99] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 275.

[100] A. Baz, "Stanley Cavell's Argument of the Ordinary", in *The Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, 7, n. 2, 2018, 9–48.

not have the further consequence of making B speak. Realizing this, A will be likely to withdraw his judgment; he sees that it cannot have its intended effect. [...]

In the present case A may withdraw his judgment not merely because it will fail to serve its original purpose, but because it may have effects which he, in kindness, does not desire. It may lead B to be perturbed about his disability.

Does A assume that B has forgotten the promise? Doesn't take it seriously enough? Doesn't realize that what he said was legitimately taken as a promise? If so, why not tell him? If not, then why remind him of the fact? Does A not know that B is disabled? Then, when he finds out, does he "withdraw his judgment" because "he sees it cannot have its intended effect" or because he sees that it would be incompetent or incoherent not to? And how does he "see" that it cannot have its intended effect? Because he sees that B is disabled? Then are we to imagine that A goes to the hospital to visit B, and, after seeing both of B's legs to be in traction, says, "You ought to give the speech"? Or is the disability less obvious, so that A is in some doubt as to whether B's condition is as serious as he says? Then how does he "see" or "realize" that his judgment will not have its intended effect? Perhaps he sees that B is adamant; that might be a clear case of "realizing (finally, no matter how hard you try) that your judgment cannot have its intended effect". But we've forgotten that speech in our bewilderment. Was it important? Important enough so that you are willing to urge B to risk his health to give it, or go there in a wheel chair if necessary? Then B's reply "My health will not permit it" is not enough to make you "realize" that your judgment will not have its intended effect. And if the speech is that important then does B not know this? And if he does, then has he done nothing about it, having become ill? Has he, for example, not tried to find or suggest a replacement, or have the meeting rescheduled, or dictated a speech which could be read? If that would be uncalled for, then why is it so important that he give the speech? Why ought he to?

But enough. The speech is not important; it doesn't exist. And neither does a moral relationship exist between these people.[101]

The different treatment of the example, in Stevenson's version and in Cavell's version, is obvious. In the first case, we are presented with an ordinary life situation in a schematic way. A wants to get B to give a speech — a speech that B promised to give before he got injured. Faced with the story of the accident (Stevenson speaks generically of "disability") A is forced to withdraw his influence, his own attempt to convince B to give the speech. The example is thought of as a corollary to the emotivist

---

[101] *The Claim of Reason, cit.*, pp. 284–285.

theory, a theory that encounters difficulties when persuasion attempts can have undesirable effects on the people involved, and it is therefore preferable that they are withdrawn.

Reading Stevenson's example, and reporting it in full in *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell responds with the "storm of questions" of the passage I quoted. By giving substance to Stevenson's stylized example, Cavell shows us the absurdity of the choice and description of the example; in fact, as soon as we try to investigate how we would imagine such a situation, the example loses its effectiveness. A who tries to persuade B, injured and with his legs in traction, can make us laugh. We just can't imagine the context of that example.

All of Cavell's questions are aimed at illuminating the relationship between the two: what kind of speech was B supposed to have? Why had he promised to keep it? What will he decide to do after his injury? Will he delegate the task to someone else or will he simply postpone the meeting? And why should A insist with B? Does he not see that B is ill? Does he think B is just looking for excuses? Or does he believe that, having promised it, B is obliged to show up and honor his words? (Maybe by showing up at the event in a wheelchair?)

"But enough. The speech is not important; it doesn't exist. And neither does a moral relationship exist between these people". Cavell's final answer is clear: B's speech does not exist; Stevenson's attempt to make us imagine how it could exist fails; not only that, but the attempt to illuminate an aspect of morality has also failed. The context of Stevenson's example is too obscure to imagine how something like this might actually happen. Emotivist theory is not describing how we actually live, but it is stylizing our experience — for theoretical reasons.

Now, although it may be clear that, as Cavell writes, "there is no moral relationship between these people", it is still not clear why the choice of a certain example should be able to reveal the style of a philosopher. Yet, in the course of this section, we have already approached some issues related to style in philosophy. For example, when we read about the image that "controls Stevenson's writing entirely". This image calls into question the issue of authority in philosophical writing: if philosophy (moral philosophy, in this case) does not possess the authority of science (an authority which it envies), what kind of authority does it have?

Stevenson's answer is (something like): 'the analytical neutrality of the philosopher will allow us to find the structure, the bases, the foundation of our moral experience; and this foundation is discovered in our ability to influence other people's attitudes'. Stevenson's style is therefore neutral

and somewhat aseptic, and is closer to the style of science and logic. In these areas, the attention to expression is reduced to a minimum, and is regarded as secondary, as a corollary to an enterprise that is conducted on other tracks.

Cavell's answer, on the other hand, is (again something like): 'It is a question of recalling our moral experience, not of pretending to discover its foundation; even if the solution found won't be neutral (several people may find themselves in disagreement with us), it will still be a solution open to dialogue and confrontation'. In this sense, the questions raised by Cavell do not pretend to be definitive, but invite readers to imagine — each on their own — how a given situation could take shape, what it tells us about our moral experience and what aspects it brings to light, or obscure, formulated in a certain way with respect to others.

Cavell's style therefore turns out to be closer to literature. But in the same way that ordinary life is closer to literature: in fact, the ability of philosophers to give shape, with their words, to imagined examples, will run into the same risks that any person faces when she finds herself describing a moral situation. A film director or novelist might be practiced enough, or gifted enough, to illuminate a moral situation; however — and it is worth emphasizing — it is in the power of any ordinary person to be able to express the same situation as best as she can.

According to Cavell, attention to style — understood here, for the sake of this analysis, as *the attempt to cure the expressive form* — thus seems to be central to the philosopher's enterprise (the moral philosopher, in this case). And a lack of attention, a neglect of this dimension can be fatal to its objectives. (Just as in the case of Heidegger, raised by Cavell in his autobiography, and which I will not discuss here further.) Instead, again according to Cavell, an absence of style — or rather, a reduction to a minimum of the expressive form, which results, as in Stevenson's case, in an operation of *stylization* — ends up being fatal to the attempt to account for morality, discharging the philosophers of their authority.

The Voice of Reason

At the end of the chapter *An Absence of Morality*, Cavell recalls how the attempt to subvert the concept of morality is certainly not new. However, when other people have done just that they have also realized its enormity. Cavell writes:

When others have undertaken this task, they have recognized the enormity of their claim; and in accepting personal responsibility for it they have gone mad, or to prison, or into various forms of exile. It is a relatively new idea that the claim is itself a neutral one, taken in the service of the advanced ideas of logic and scientific method, the dictates of reason.[102]

The significance of this passage relies on the polysemic nature of language. When Cavell speaks of the "enormity of the claim" of a philosopher he is using the word *claim*. It is the same word that gives the title to his work, and it is a strongly polysemic word: in fact it can mean, in addition to "affirmation", also "request", "invocation", "demand", "pretense", "appeal"...

"The relatively new idea" Cavell mentions is the claim that philosophy can be neutral, and that it can simply appeal to the authority of logic and the scientific method — the new dictates of reason. Cavell's idea is that such an appeal is often fantastic: as the discussion of Stevenson's claims has shown, the attempt to speak about our moral experience based solely on ideals of neutrality, logic or scientificity is hopeless. And it was a constant effort by Cavell to remember how, faced with the stylization (or impoverishment or reduction) of the experience provided by these appeals, the philosopher needs to return "to speak with a human voice". The human voice, the voice of reason (and *claim* can also be translated with *voice*, as for example was done in the French edition of *The Claim of Reason*)[103], needs to be found in its own expressive component: for example, in the care, formation and stabilization of a style.

The idea that philosophy can do without taking care of style, of its own expressive component, is also a "relatively new" idea. As Cavell writes in his latest collection of essays, *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (2005): "If one assumes... that philosophy serves reason best in thinking of itself in connection with science, then perhaps the problem of style will not arise, or will take care of itself".[104] In light of the foregoing in this section, a good way to summarize Cavell's commitment to philosophy is to say that he (along with others, like Bernard Williams) did not let the problem of style take care of itself, but took concrete care of the problem: through the examples, in their details

---

[102] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 290.

[103] S. Cavell, *Les voix de la raison. Wittgenstein, le scepticisme, la moralité et la tragédie* (1979), traduit par N. Balso and S. Laugier, Paris, Seuil, 2012.

[104] S. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow,* Cambridge, Mass. - London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 208.

and in their particularity, which are sought through an acute attention to the language used and the situation imagined.

In doing so, Cavell found a way to respond to the appeal (and not the dictate — how could such an appeal be followed to the letter?) of his teacher J. L. Austin, who, before him, had declared that in philosophy "using a sharpened awareness of words ... we sharpen our perception of ... phenomena".[105] Starting from the writings of the years 1955-61, Cavell followed, in unexpected and original ways (as evidenced by the excerpts of the text we have read and commented on) the road opened by Austin, and managed to form a philosophical style capable of sharpening our perception of moral phenomena.

The writing of examples thus proved to be a far from marginal aspect of Cavell's philosophical style. On the contrary, it was able to show the profound ambitions of Cavell's philosophy, which wants to take on morality, and its problems, in the most realistic way possible. These ambitions are expressed at their best in the very oldest pages of *The Claim of Reason*, as if to testify how deep, and firmly anchored, the Cavellian vision of philosophy and morality is.

---

[105] J. L. Austin, *A Plea for Excuses*, in *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961.

2.2 Bernard Williams's Philosophical Style: A Case Study

Introduction

Concluding the first of six lectures held at Harvard in 1992-93 and published as *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994), Umberto Eco, after having invited us to pay attention to the textual strategy of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), claims: "[...] In this text, Wittgenstein is merely a philosophical style, and his model reader merely the will and ability to adapt to this style, cooperating to make it possible".[106] To affirm that Wittgenstein is nothing more than a philosophical style is equivalent to affirming that textual strategies are very important: one could not, for example, rewrite the text of the *Philosophical Investigations*, paraphrase it, and preserve its effectiveness. What Eco seems to imply, with his observation, is also the novelty of this type of choice. Neglecting the problem of style, in fact, a philosopher is simply led to inherit one, or some, typical of one's cultural context, or of one's tradition (paraphrasing Santayana's warning on the history of philosophy: "whoever does not experiment with new styles is doomed to repeat old ones").[107]

If I had to summarize the central idea of this section, I would therefore say: Bernard Williams (like Wittgenstein) also sought his own style in philosophy, and this search took on particular importance for him not only in order to avoid repeating old styles and old traditions, but also, and above all, in order to remain adherent to his vision of morality. The choice in favor of a certain type of examples, therefore, becomes the expression of this vision. What is more, some of the examples imagined by Williams play an essential role in the economy of his philosophical style: the textual strategy of his writings would be weakened, almost unrecognizable, without this type of examples. For the sake of brevity, this section will consider only the examples in *A Critique of Utilitarianism* (1973), while leaving out the examples of Williams's later works (which, of course, will remain marked by the conception and writing of the examples in *A Critique of Utilitarianism*).

---

[106] U. Eco, *Six Walks into the Fictional Woods*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 25.

[107] Santayana's warning about the history of philosophy is quoted in *Essays and Reviews*, *cit.*, p. 368: "In general, one must take extremely seriously Santayana's warning that those who are ignorant of the history of philosophy are doomed to recapitulate it".

The Williamsian Vision of Morality

It dates back to 1972 the publication of Williams's first book, *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics*.[108] In this first long contribution (novella-length, as had been requested by the editor Arthur Danto) Williams declares that "the initial responsibilities of [each writer] should be to moral phenomena, as grasped in one's own experience and imagination".[109] The reason why Williams recommends special attention to moral phenomena is due to the risks posed by the construction of systematic theories of morality. In the narrative texture of *Morality*, Williams gets to emphasize the importance of turning one's gaze to one's own experience and imagination after *not* having apologized for *not* expounding any systematic theory in his book. Williams writes: "I am not ashamed about that [not having expounded any systematic theory] since it seems to me that this subject [morality] has received more over-general and over-simplified systematization, while inviting it less, than virtually any other part of philosophy".[110] Moral phenomena are much more complex, rich and multifaceted than systematic theories suggest, and Williams's attempt is to remain faithful to this complexity.

The systematic theories that Williams has in mind are those of utilitarian and Kantian inspiration (or hybrids of both approaches, such as the moral theory of R. M. Hare, Williams's tutor at Oxford). Williams is also interested in questioning any theoretical enterprise which, as he would write in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), "looks characteristically for considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible, because it is trying to systematize and because it wants to represent as many reasons as possible as applications of other reasons".[111] The considerations of moral theories, Kantian or utilitarian, are too general and abstract and try to systematize a matter that cannot be explained through the appeal to "as many reasons as possible as applications of other reasons". This statement is intended to indicate a purely rational path that would inevitably lead moral thought to systematic tracks.

---

[108] I will discuss the Williamsian vision of morality keeping in mind the ideas expressed in *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics* (1972). For this reason, I will not discuss the distinction elaborated by Williams later, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), between "ethics" and "morality" (in the narrow sense of "system of morality", criticized in the tenth chapter of the book).

[109] B. Williams, *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics* (1972), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. xxi.

[110] *Morality, cit.*, p. xx.

[111] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, cit.*, pp. 129–130.

What does this approach leave out? More or less the whole moral life in which we are immersed, that is reduced to the bone and simplified for the specific purposes of the moral theory of the moment (whether it is contractualist, utilitarian or Kantian). Let us take the case of utilitarianism, which we will deal with more extensively in what follows: in *Morality*, Williams gets to write that "utilitarianism makes tragedy impossible", since, through his theory centered on the 'principle of maximum happiness', it goes so far as denying that there can be a situation in which "whatever [the agent] does involves doing something wrong".[112] Yet these situations do exist and we live them — or we observe them living — regularly.

Allow me a small digression: I spoke of a "Williamsian vision of morality" having in mind the characterization of Wittgenstein's vision of language according to Stanley Cavell: at the end of a long (and famous) section of *The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy* (1962), Cavell goes so far as arguing that the Wittgensteinian vision is "terrifying",[113] as it casts a glance on the contingency and fragility of our linguistic practices; and, in *The Claim of Reason* (1979), Cavell compares it (using a Nietzschean image) to "a thin net over the abyss".[114]

I think it makes sense, in the schematic nature of the expression used, to speak of a vision also in Williams's case: moral phenomena are seen by him for what they are, in their crudeness, without the filter of moral theories. And, although it is sometimes said that some thinkers 'open our eyes', Williams (again like Wittgenstein) is of the opinion that we must come to see the reality in front of us *on our own*, to observe and to appreciate the complexity of moral situations in which we are immersed — resisting the attempts of moral theories, which invite us to think *less* in ethics, while we need to think *more*, or rather, neither more nor less than the situations under examination requires.

Starting from *Morality*, one of the tasks that Williams assigns to himself is that of referring to this complexity — to which readers will inevitably have to deal with on their own — and of criticizing too abstract enterprises. For this reason, his writing will have to live up to the particularity and detail that are close to his heart. If one wants to write about moral philosophy (which from the first

---

[112] *Morality, cit.*, p. 86.

[113] *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays, cit.*, p. 48.

[114] *The Claim of Reason, cit.*, p. 178.

line of *Morality* is defined as "a hazardous business")[115] it is therefore essential to find the right style.

A Stylistic Problem? The Case of *A Critique of Utilitarianism* (1973)

In the Preface of *Morality*, Williams takes a reflective stance towards what he calls "a stylistic problem":

> [There is] a stylistic problem, in the deepest sense of 'style', in which to discover the right style is to discover what you are really trying to do. How does one combine argument (which is after all likely to constitute the philosopher's special claim on anyone's attention) with either the longer leaps or the more concrete detail which provide the more interesting stuff of moral thought? Can the reality of complex moral situations be represented by means other than those of imaginative literature? If not, can more schematic approaches represent enough of the reality? How much of what genuinely worries anyone is responsive to general theory?[116]

In this passage Williams seems to have a clear idea of what is involved in the *discovery* of a style: discovering a style is discovering one's task; it is not just the discovery of something accessory, of the right way to present something objective, neutral, uncontroversial. Discovering a style means excluding alternative ways: selecting one's interests, finding the right way to present them and explore them. This claim about style is followed by a series of questions, which present us with the task that Williams has assigned to himself: to reconcile argument with the longer leaps, the *more* concrete details, the *more* interesting substance of the moral thought. From a textual point of view, the repetition of the comparative adverb 'more' is significant: Williams feels constrained in the guise of Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy, he wants something *more*. The first question is followed by another question in which Williams asks which wider ways allow to overcome the vision of philosophy understood as pure argument (as *just* argument, which means with shorter leaps, less detail, less substance): what are the means that make it possible to represent the reality of complex

---

[115] *Morality*, *cit.*, p. xvii.

[116] *Ivi*, *cit.*, p. xix.

moral situations? Are there any means that are halfway between the literary and the overly schematic ones?

In asking these questions Williams introduces a term of comparison for philosophy, and it is literature. Williams seems to have in mind *the more* provided by literary narratives: for example, short stories or novels. These narratives are in fact able to represent "enough of the reality"; however, if arguments alone turn out to be *too little* for Williams's purposes, narratives alone turn out to be *too much*.

Williams's book will still be novella-length, but can it be said to have the structure and depth of (say) a Dostoevsky's short novel? What is the difference between *Notes from Underground* and *Morality*? The fundamental difference is that in *Morality* the reality of moral situations is represented — in Williams's words — "more schematically". While an affinity between these two texts is the sharing of an annoyance expressed by Williams's last question: "How much of what really matters to someone lets itself be expressed by general theories?". In a rather summary way, it can be said that Dostoevsky stages this annoyance, while Williams tries to show it through the creation of schematic examples — such as the examples that will be presented and commented on in *A Critique of Utilitarianism*.

Williams is aware of the purpose assigned to the examples presented in *A Critique of Utilitarianism* and writes in this regard:

> Where I have offered examples ... the aim is not just to offer or elicit moral intuitions against which utilitarianism can be tested. Although in the end everyone has to reflect, in relation to questions like these, what he would be prepared to live with, the aim of the examples and their discussion is not just to ask a question about that and wait for the answer: rather, the aim is to lead into reflections which might show up in greater depth what would be involved in living with these ideas.[117]

Williams therefore seeks greater depth: greater than the typical texts of contemporary moral philosophy, less than the typical texts of literature. This attempt is not being conducted from a purely intellectual position; Williams is not interested in testing utilitarianism by providing counterexamples, imaginary cases that provoke insights contrary to utilitarian ones. The interests that move Williams are therefore not abstract, but are personal and alive. It can be said that *A*

---

[117] J. J. C. Smart – B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. 78.

Critique of Utilitarianism was for Williams — as *The Birth of Tragedy* had been for Nietzsche — a book moved by "a deeply personal matter".

"I used to have very pious utilitarian views", confessed Williams in a 2002 interview, "but I came to see that consequentialist reasoning could just lead you on and on in the wrong direction".[118] Although in *Morality* there is already a chapter dedicated to utilitarianism (and, in the same interview, Williams adds that just writing *Morality* showed him how much he hated utilitarianism)[119], *A Critique of Utilitarianism* represents a stage that bears the signs of a real reckoning, not only with the utilitarian doctrine — and specifically, with the consequentialist reasoning — but also with the philosophical style embodied by some of its leading exponents. The polemical target of Williams's text is J. J. C. Smart, author of Smart's *An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics* (collected in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*). The title of the contribution is already a declaration of intent. Unlike Williams, Smart has no problem building an ethical system; indeed, abstraction is seen as a process necessary for philosophical thought and is claimed by Smart as the best way to tackle moral problems.

A Stylized Example by J. J. C. Smart

For the purposes of this section I will limit myself to commenting on one example from Smart, particularly revealing of his philosophical style and suitable to pave the way for commenting on Williams's examples. Let us call it 'the example of the electrode operator'. In order to show the style of the example, I report the text (almost) in its entirety:

> [...] A pleasant picture of the voluptuary of the future, a bald-headed man with a number of electrodes protruding from his skull, one to give the physical pleasure of sex, one for that of eating, one for that of drinking, and so on. Now is this the sort of life that all our ethical planning should culminate in? A few hours' work a week, automatic factories, comfort and security from disease, and hours spent at a switch, continually electrifying various regions of one's brain? Surely not. Men were made for higher things, one can't help wanting to say, even though one knows that men weren't made for anything, but are the product of evolution by natural selection. [...] Perhaps a possible reluctance to call the electrode operator 'happy' might come from the following circumstance. The electrode operator might be perfectly

---

[118] Stuart Jeffries, "The quest for truth" , in *The Guardian*, 30 November, 2002.

[119] *Ibidem*.

contented, might perfectly enjoy his electrode operating, and might not be willing his lot for any other. [...] All this is psychologically possible. It is just the obverse of a situation which we often find. [...] A man may be very anxious to catch a bus, so as to be in time for a dental appointment, and yet a few minutes later, while the drill is boring into his tooth, may wish that he had missed that bus. It is, contrariwise, perfectly possible that I should be annoyed today if told that from tomorrow onwards I should be an electrode addict, even though I knew that from tomorrow onwards I should be perfectly contented. [...] To call a person 'happy' is to say more than that he is contented for most of the time, or even that he frequently enjoys himself and is rarely discontented or in pain. It is, I think, in part to express a favourable attitude to the idea of such a form of contentment and enjoyment. That is, for A to call B 'happy', A must be contented at the prospect of B being in his present state of mind and at the prospect of A himself, should the opportunity arise, enjoying the sort of state of mind. That is, 'happy' is a word which is mainly descriptive (tied to the concepts of contentment and enjoyment) but which is also partly evaluative. It is because Mill approves of the 'higher' pleasures, e.g. intellectual pleasures, so much more than he approves of the more simple brutish pleasures, that, quite apart from consequences and side effects, he can pronounce the man who enjoys the pleasures of philosophical discourse 'more happy' than the man who gets enjoyment from pushpin or beer drinking.[120]

Who would think of such an example? Surely a person interested in criticizing utilitarianism and in showing a hardly acceptable situation as an example of a 'happy life': specifically, a life regulated and oriented by the amount of pleasure activated (very mechanically, through electrodes) in one's body. But it is precisely where Smart makes self-criticism that it reveals its basic assumptions. Indeed, the assumption that the utilitarian moral philosopher must add up pleasurable states of affairs to measure happiness is not disputed, but is merely attenuated by the qualitative distinction between 'high and low pleasures'.

The idea of adding pleasure to obtain happiness is not criticized as crude for the procedure of adding itself, but for the nature of the pleasures involved: adopting a "church way"[121] typical of a certain utilitarianism, Smart takes up the distinction of Mill between high pleasures (reading poetry, learning math) and low pleasures (drinking alcohol, gambling); the former are qualitatively preferable to the latter, and a greater sum of the latter will not be preferable to a smaller sum of the former. Smart's self-criticism could have been effective, but his response merely reiterates some

---

[120] J. J. C. Smart, *An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics*, in *Utilitarianism: For and Against, cit.*, pp. 19–22.

[121] *Utilitarianism: For and Against, cit.*, p. 110.

typical aspects of utilitarianism, which are also its weaknesses. It is significant to note how to the question: "Is this the sort of life that all our ethical planning should culminate in?", Smart replies: "Surely not", and then adds: "Men were made for higher things". It is always things, states of affairs (although the more noble ones are more important than the less noble ones — another "church" expression) that occupy the center stage. On the contrary, the man, a generic and stylized man, who moreover in the example of Smart is *bald*, without even the distinctive trait of his hair (but we would not find it hard to imagine him without any distinctive trait anymore) plays the role of secondary actor and it must follow the staging — or setting in motion, as in the case of the electrode — of the states of affairs themselves. (What would Smart say if by pressing the electrode button we received the pleasure of poetry or mathematics? Would that be an acceptable example of life then?) These considerations make us lean towards the idea that Williams's critique of utilitarianism, to which we now pass, was already contained in a nutshell in this example by Smart. And Williams does not fail to notice and comment on it:

> In his struggles with the problem of the brain-electrode man, Smart commends the idea that 'happy' is a partly evaluative term [...]. Smart's argument at this point seems to be embarassed by a well-known utilitarian uneasiness, which comes from a feeling that it is not respectable to ignore the 'deep', while not having anywhere left in human life to locate it.[122]

Leaving no room for the depth of people's lives, their desires and aspirations (to what Williams will call their "ground projects")[123], utilitarianism examines a stylized and minimal idea of man, who could be anyone — who, as Dostoevsky would say, is treated like a piano key:[124] a piece of a gear that responds to external stimuli and does not possess its own independence and integrity.

The depth of Williams's examples

The aim of Williams's examples is to go deeper and to show what it would be like to live with utilitarianism; show it really, with all the details and nuances that a real situation implies. Let us

---

[122] *Utilitarianism: For and Against, cit.*, p. 114.

[123] B. Williams, *The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality*, in B. Williams, *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973.

[124] F. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864), New York, Random House, 1994, pp. 24, 30 and 31.

move then on to the presentation of Williams's examples. These examples are well known in the academic literature on utilitarianism; however, no doubt for speed and simplicity (but with the risk of stylization: that is, the reduction of the example to its essential parts, with consequent loss of details), they are rarely mentioned in the original. In order to understand the stylistic differences between the examples of the two philosophers, I report again the text in its entirety:

> George, who has just taken his Ph.D. in chemistry, finds it extremely difficult to get a job. He is not very robust in health, which cuts down the number of jobs he might be able to do satisfactorily. His wife has to go out to work to keep them, which itself causes a great deal of strain since they have small children and there are severe problems about looking after them. The results of all this, especially on the children, are damaging. An older chemist, who knows about this situation, says that he can get George a decently paid job in a certain laboratory, which pursues research into chemical and biological warfare. George says that he cannot accept this, since he is opposed to chemical and biological warfare. The older man replies that he is not too keen on it himself, come to that, but after all George's refusal is not going to make the job or the laboratory go away; what is more, he happens to know that if George refuses the job, it will certainly go to a contemporary of George's who is not inhibited by any such scruples and is likely if appointed to push along the research with greater zeal than George would. Indeed, it is not merely concern for George and his family, but (to speak frankly and in confidence) some alarm about this other man's excess of zeal, which has led the older man to offer to use his influence to get George the job ... [ellipsis in original] George's wife, to whom he is deeply attached, has views (the details of which need not concern us) from which it follows that at least there is nothing particularly wrong with research into CBW. What should he do?

> Jim finds himself in the central square of a small South American town. Tied up against the wall are a row of twenty Indians, most terrified, a few defiant, in front of them several armed men in uniform. A heavy man in a sweat-stained khaki shirt turns out to be the captain in charge and, after a good deal of questioning of Jim which establishes that he got there by accident while on a botanical expedition, explains that the Indians are a random group of the inhabitants who, after recent acts of protest against the government, are just about to be killed to remind other possible protestors of the advantages of not protesting. However, since Jim is an honoured visitor from another land, the captain is happy to offer him a guest's privilege of killing one of the Indians himself. If Jim accepts, then as a special mark of the occasion, the other Indians will be let off. Of course, if Jim refuses, then there is no special occasion, and Pedro here will do what he was about to do when Jim arrived, and kill them all. Jim, with some desperate recollection of schoolboy fiction, wonders whether if he got hold of a gun, he could hold the captain,

Pedro and the rest of the soldiers to threat, but it is quite clear from the set-up that nothing of that kind is going to work: any attempt at that sort of thing will mean that all the Indians will be killed, and himself. The men against the wall, and the other villagers, understand the situation, and are obviously begging him to accept. What should he do?[125]

Read outside their context of belonging, these two stories might seem like extracts from two short stories. What brings these two texts closer to fiction is certainly the presence of details. In both cases, in fact, Williams dwells on apparently irrelevant details. In George's case, his weak health, his difficulty in finding work, the tensions generated by having to look after his children, the relationship with his wife are mentioned (albeit schematically); and the proposal of George's elderly colleague is situated in this context, which has a story.

Can we imagine the world of George, the person who has just finished a PhD in chemistry, with fragile health, looking for a job, with children to feed and willing to compromise in order to earn a salary? Yes, the details of the example allow us that. But are these sufficient conditions to justify his possible agreement with his colleague's proposal? A utilitarian would be inclined to justify George's consent and to consider it as the best solution based on another detail added by Williams: his colleague's proposal, in fact, turns out to be motivated above all by the fear that another person, with fewer scruples than George against chemical-biological warfare, would get the job in case he refuses.

According to the doctrine of *negative responsibility* — one of the doctrines welcomed by Smart's ethical system — we are also responsible for the actions we do not take. If by avoiding performing an action X then in the world a state of things Y will occur, worse than Z, which would occur if I performed X, then I am responsible for X. George finds himself entangled in this causal web, originating from the projects of the people around him. The moment we listen to utilitarianism, Williams notes, we turn George into *a causal lever*. To see the choice to accept the job as obvious is to reduce George's life to "an output of optimific decision",[126] a generator of better and better states

---

[125] *Utilitarianism: For and Against, cit.*, pp. 97–99.

[126] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 116.

of affairs in the world — but, ultimately, no longer an independent, whole person, but a person who has suffered "in the most literal sense of the word, an attack on his integrity".[127]

Unlike George's, Jim's example is more evidently stylized, being built according to utilitarian canons and according to that crude calculation typical of utilitarianism ("[that] will also have something to say about the difference [...] between the massacre of seven million people and the massacre of seven million and one"[128]): twenty Indians against one. In Jim's case, however, it is the immediacy of the situation that provides the relevant details: we speak of the fear and defiant attitude of the Indians; the weapons with which they are about to be executed are also mentioned; and there is a reference to the sweat of the captain's khaki shirt. A short excerpt on Jim's inner process follows: we manage to grasp his desperation, and we hint at the alternatives that Jim envisions in order to avoid the solution proposed by the captain (which actually sounds unrealistic: does it makes sense to imagine that the captain offers Jim to shoot an Indian as a "guest privilege?"). The scene with which the example ends is also important, the image of the Indians against the wall, who beg Jim to accept the captain's offer.

In every real or realistic situation there will be details like that: from the commander's sweat to the defiant looks of political prisoners. (It comes to mind that in Camus' *The Stranger* a scorching sun is one of the contributing causes of the killing of the Arab.) Precisely these details put into question the obviousness of the utilitarian solution. For utilitarianism, Williams says, "George should accept the job [...] and Jim should kill the Indian".[129] But the situation is more complex than that. The solution depends on what kind of person they are and above all what kind of people they want to be. Regarding their cases, one can legitimately ask: Will George be willing to give up his pacifist convictions? Will Jim be willing to live with the memory of the act committed? If there is one thing to be sure of, it is that these questions have no obvious answers. The stories invite you to ask further. Commenting on the use of George and Jim's examples in the 1995 *Festschrift*, *World, Mind and Ethics. The Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Williams himself wrote: "Over all this, or round it, and certainly at the end of it, there should have been heard 'what do you think?', 'does it seem like that to you?', 'what if anything do you want to do with the notion of

---

[127] *Ivi*, *cit.*, p. 117.

[128] *Ivi*, *cit.*, p. 93.

[129] *Ivi*, *cit.*, p. 99.

integrity?'".[130] It is important to note that the notion of *integrity* is not presented by Williams as a mere theoretical notion as opposed to that of *utility*. The integrity of men, of some specific men (George and Jim) is *staged* (albeit in a rather schematic way). And it must be staged if we want to grasp the profound implications that moral thinking cannot overlook.

The examples of George and Jim reveal what Williams believed to be fundamental to moral philosophy. The expression he used to describe this task is: *sharpening perception*.[131] Williams writes at the end of the preface added in the 1993 edition of *Morality*: "The aim [of moral philosophy] is to sharpen perception, that is, to make one more acutely and honestly aware of what one is saying, thinking and feeling".[132] In showing us what George and Jim say, think and feel, bringing their situations to life, Williams invites the reader to do the same: what would you say, think and feel about such situations? What conclusions would you be willing to draw? There is no obvious solution. The different sensibilities of the readers will highlight what kinds of people they want to be, what choices they are willing to make to face the complexity — and contingency — of their moral life. The game that Williams plays with his reader is open and the philosopher does not have the last word. Still commenting on George and Jim's examples, Williams wrote:

> Granted that a writer is not writing a letter, to which he awaits an answer; granted in particular that he is
> a philosophical writer, what questions (I now ask) might it be sensible for him to ask his readers?
> Questions, I suppose, that it is sensible for his readers, at his suggestion, to ask themselves.[133]

Against the paternalism and moralism of the utilitarian philosophical style, Williams's writing invites and encourages the autonomy of the reader. In contrast with the lack of freedom, due to the

---

[130] J. Altham – R. Harrison (edited by), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 211.

[131] This expression is reminiscent of Austin's quote in Section 2.1 See *infra* pp. 75–76.

[132] *Morality, cit.*, p. 15.

[133] *World, Mind, and Ethics, cit.*, p. 210.

constraints imposed by the story, of novels — but, more generally, of any other *dense fiction*[134] — and in contrast with the abundance of freedom, due to the abstraction of argument alone, Williams therefore tried to follow a median path.

This median solution of Williams's style, not too abstract but not too dense, finds an analogy with the style of Georges Seurat (1859-1891) in painting. Indeed, it was Williams himself who suggested this juxtaposition. In an interview in 1996, Williams spoke of moral philosophy as "an almost impossible subject": the difficulty of moral philosophy arises from his search for a median term between theory and narrative, between abstraction and density.[135] As a positive example of a median path taken in painting Williams cites the example of Seurat:

> Impressionism was called the painting of modern life. It didn't look as if it was made out of the old salon material, it looked like something people were actually doing. I would like there to be moral philosophy that was a bit like Seurat. Something that was directly related to everyday life, but that also made it look rather strange and new because it was rather monumental and had a very strong structure.[136]

Let us try to take these claims seriously. First of all, there is a reference to the painter's studio: the subjects of his paintings are indeed built in the workshop, in the painter's old salon (at least this was the case in the specific case of Seurat, who unlike many impressionists did not paint *en plein air*), but they will then take the form of "everyday life". Similarly, Williams's examples were built in the laboratory, in the philosopher's studio, but the precision of his instruments is aimed at representing

[134] "We can ask both what kinds of fiction can significantly help moral philosophy, and what styles of moral philosophy can be helped by fiction. (It could be a test of realism in a style of ethical thinking that it can learn from compelling fictions.) It is not surprising that the fiction that most easily responds to these needs, particularly when ethical thought is directed to traits of character, is (as I shall put it) "dense" fiction, above all the realistic novel, which provides a depth of characterization and social background which gives substance to the moral situation and brings it nearer to everyday experience". See B. Williams, *The Sense of the Past. Essays in the History of Philosophy*, edited by M. Burnyeat, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 55–56.

[135] "I think moral philosophy is an almost impossible subject", he declares at one point. "On the one hand highly theoretical moral philosophy is abstract and falsified. Its theories tend to be artificial academic constructs, very little to do with how people live their lives. On the other hand, if you try to write something with the kind of immediacy or concreteness or untidiness or imaginative echoes of those ideas by which people really do live their lives, you're in the realm of imaginative fiction". See John Davies, "A fugitive from the pigeonhole", in *Times Higher Education*, 1996.

[136] *Ibidem.*

"something that people actually do". Williams also talks about the monumentality and very solid structure of Seurat's paintings.

Let us take as a significant example of his entire production *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (1883-1885). In a rather schematic and summary way, we can say that in Seurat's painting it is the characters who are monumental while it is the pointillist painting technique that provides "the very solid structure". What can these elements correspond to in the philosophical field? Let us take the cases of George and Jim. The characters are monumental to the extent that a tragic choice is staged, a choice that will forever mark the life of the person at stake.

The depth of these two examples, however, contrasts with the framework in which they are presented: between the lines, one can read Williams's contempt for the utilitarian scheme (being responsible for the actions of others, killing one person rather than twenty). In an analogous way Seurat, deciding to set his masterpiece *Un dimanche après-midi in l'Île de la Grande Jatte* in the meeting island of the Parisian bourgeoisie, has incorporated in the painting not only the depth of some human feelings (such as loneliness, that distinguishes most of the characters in the scene) through the *monumentality*, the solemnity (expressed through the greatness of the physique, and not through the description of the emotional situation, as in Williams) of the characters, but also his contempt for that world. Seurat's painting — like Williams's writing — arouses in us questions and reflections on the lives of the people involved. The novelty of this representation also consists in the pictorial technique adopted, the so-called pointillist style. It is in fact the set of dots, and their skillful combination, that makes the luminous effect possible on the surface of Seurat's painting; likewise, the philosopher like Williams was able to render the examples illuminating through a skillful juxtaposition of details. Williams's details — like Seurat's dots — are an attempt to keep the right distance between too much density and too much abstraction. The result is a right distance, which must be in the eye of the painter as in that of the observer, in the eye of the writer as in that of the reader.

The question posed by Williams at the end of the preface to *Morality* in 1972, "how does one combine argument ... with ... the more concrete details of moral thought?", thus finds an answer, or a beginning of an answer, in the examples of *A Critique of Utilitarianism* — and the adoption of a philosophical style, halfway between abstraction and density, is an integral part of this answer.

2.3 Epilogue

Beyond Stylization

Although the presentation of the philosophical styles of Cavell and Williams was partial and incomplete, as it dwelt only on the writing of the examples, I believe it nevertheless succeeded in showing a common path. For both of them, in the years of their first philosophical publications (for Cavell it is the PhD, for Williams it is indeed the first books: *Morality* and *A Critique of Utilitarianism*) a road opens up, yes, and it is a road that opens up as a result of the choices made. Both show elegance in controlling a literary medium that is often (as Stevenson's and Smart's examples show) not only uncontrolled but not even problematized by certain philosophers. One could, for instance, admit to writing bad literature, in one's own philosophical texts, and such an admission of one's stylistic limitations would certainly be understood by a good part of philosophers. What sounds "arrogant" is to claim that poor literature does not imply poor philosophy. This claim sounds arrogant to both Cavell and Williams, who believe that there is a very close connection between philosophy and literature. For them, it is not possible to separate the two fields without losing something important. In particular, a clumsy use of the literary medium has significant consequences for the philosophical goals of both philosophers. Thus, we see the first criterion of Emersonian perfectionist writing at work: *the blurred boundaries between literature and philosophy*. A blurred boundary, in the sense of a compromise between literature and philosophy, which is actively sought in Cavell and Williams for similar reasons, for a similar metaphilosophical stance. Both seek a form of moral philosophy that is realistic and concrete, that is inspired by existential and personal issues, and thus addresses questions that make a difference in human lives. The criterion is thus met in both — it is *how* precisely it is met, especially in the following works, that raises a different problem of style (which will be examined later in Chapter Three).

In Chapter One the first criterion of Emersonian Perfectionist writing had been hinted at without being too much elaborated. While Section 2.1 and Section 2.2 allowed us to see, in concrete terms, how to the problem of style posed by the writing of the examples Williams and Cavell reacted similarly: without showing lack of interest in the literary medium of philosophy; indeed, actively seeking a philosophical style in which a compromise between literature and philosophy is expressed; and, above all, without forgetting that 'poor literature implies a poor philosophy'. In a sense,

however, poverty is a value of philosophical writing for both Williams and Cavell — if we say, for instance, that their philosophy is poor of theories. But this is another sense than what I have called, in Section 2.1 and Section 2.2, "stylization". We can therefore ask: what is meant by stylization? What kind of poverty is involved in the stylization of our thinking (expressed, for example, by what I have called 'poor literature')? How can a process of stylization be avoided? And when stylizations might, on the contrary, be encouraged? To answer these questions, let us take a long ride.

We could understand by "stylization" a recurrent temptation in our practices. For example, when we learn to perform a certain kind of activity, a first response might be to reduce it to its bare bone structure or its basic steps, and thus perform it in a "stylized" way. Stylization, however, can also be a good thing. There are areas where it is through stylization that one is able to get results, such as in the natural sciences (thanks to the help of various modeling processes). But the question is even deeper, because stylization also affects the social sciences — where, as Weber teaches, if you don't have stylized types (what he called *Idealtypen*) you don't go very far. So, stylization is bad for authors like Cavell and Williams because they both think philosophy is a personal matter. Stylization is not bad *per se*; it depends on the purposes.[137] For some important aspects of their philosophical style they need to go further. It is not enough to repeat schematic and rigid, preformed and predetermined steps without adding anything of oneself and of one's experience. Without adding even a tiny bit of one's own imagination. A stylized phase does not have to last all the time of the philosopher's performance — indeed, with time, the moment may come to go beyond it.

This is a general sense of stylization. Moreover, as mentioned in Section 2.1, Cavell himself has spoken about the concept of "stylization" in his work; in particular, he reflected on this concept in his autobiography (drawing on his personal experience). We can therefore give the floor to him first, and then return to Williams:

> For the moment I want to complete my sense of the sanity supervening upon my pouring out my immature philosophical heart in that initial, unbridled philosophical effort of mine [...]. I had demonstrated for myself two aspects of what I thought of as philosophical that have never ceased to

---

[137] See D. Cueni – M. Queloz, "Whence the Demand for Ethical Theory?", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 58 (2), 2021, pp. 135 –146.

elaborate themselves in what I write. First, the task of description, of some so far undefined species, is more fundamental to philosophy, or constant in it, as I care about it most, than the tasks of explanation or argument. Since philosophy has no knowledge of its own, its power must lie in uncovering obviousness, in a sense becoming undeniable. (This is not the same as one's becoming certain.) This is a thought (or prethought) that prepared the way for Austin and then later Wittgenstein to count so decisively for me, and that blocked a certain way of appealing to Freud's discoveries. (Freudian explanations were everywhere and may or may not prove convincing. What was undeniable were the cases, the description of symptoms and their articulations that my body seemed directly to absorb.) Second, nothing of human interest should be ruled out as beneath philosophical interest, so that when philosophical strictures slight or stylize my experience, the philosophy is no less brought into question than the experience.[138]

In this passage, Cavell, in his reminiscent and sentimental style, takes stock of at least three issues related to the process of stylization. First, to overcome the temptation of stylization one needs courage; and, very often, immaturity. In this case, Cavell is talking about his own immaturity and some youthful efforts related to his early writings. (One can speculate, however, that a certain immaturity can also be sought later, as an adult: in this regard, to drive home his point, Cavell will repeatedly recall Emerson's idea that we admire the young man not so much because his words are correct, but because they are *his*.)[139] Second, the kind of philosophy Cavell is interested in incorporates into its practice an adequate attention to *description*. This fact may bring to mind the detailed descriptions of Williams' realistic, living examples, real three-dimensional men with depth — and not stylized *and bald* as Smart's. It is no coincidence that Williams himself notes a Beckettian echo in the more or less absurd and stylized cases presented by Smart. Not that there is anything wrong with such an operation, if it is carried out consciously (as in Beckett's case, who might be called 'a stylist of stylization'): the problem is that in much contemporary philosophy it is precisely the lack of attention to an adequate description of human experience that generates examples of men with two, one, anyway with *very few* dimensions. Third, according to Cavell, everything that is interesting for the human is equally interesting for philosophy. In this sense, philosophical writing does not have the first word, but it must cultivate (often, and in areas such as

---

[138] *Little Did I Know*, *cit.*, pp. 249–250.

[139] An idea expressed, for instance, in Emerson's *Self-reliance*.

ethics, very often) virtues such as that of receptivity: it must be receptive to what Williams has called "moral phenomena". Philosophical operations find their legitimacy to the extent that they manage to respond to the complexity of experience; and if a narrower, more rigid operation — such as that of many theoretical, or systematic enterprises — ends up stylizing my experience, then it can, according to Cavell and Williams, be questioned.

Affinities *and not*

The spirit of the philosophical writing of both Cavell and Williams, then, as has emerged from Section 2.1 and Section 2.2, is thus *intrinsically* literary. The authority of the philosopher is an authority that is earned on the field of expression — and a poor, stylized expression can be rejected, reformulated, and deepened. It is a different authority from that of science, for which the problem of style can take care of itself, without the scientist taking an active interest in how his or her words sound. At least, this is Cavell's idea, which I quoted at the end of Section 1.1. However, although it was not specified in the pages of Section 2.2, Williams does agree with such a claim. According to Williams, in fact, philosophy does not have a privileged point of view, *an Archimedean point*, capable of reaching the foundations of our ethical life. This point simply does not exist — or, at least, does not exist for philosophy. Within *the limits* of philosophy, Williams writes, "our major problem now is actually that we have not too many but too few [*ideas* — which we could be tempted to reduce even more to the fundamental ones, by means of an Archimedean lever], and need to cultivate as many as we can".[140]

In both Section 2.1 and Section 2.2 I spoke of a Cavellian and a Williamsian vision of morality. I hope it was clear that, for both, it would not make sense to speak of a single — correct, scientific, neutral — vision of morality. In this field, as Nietzsche writes (and as the title of a late article by Williams on Nietzsche takes it) "there are many kinds of eyes".[141] Now, all these different eyes are *ours* — ours, in the sense of people who live here and now, who live *alongside* the texts of Cavell and Williams, and who experience the world not only as a natural fact, but also as a human, social, ethical and political fact. Contemporaries, we might say. Now, to contemporaries Cavell and Williams offer *their* vision. This is because they are both convinced that, by sharpening their own

---

[140] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, *cit*., p. 130.

[141] *The Sense of the Past*, *cit.*, pp. 325–330.

perception, they will be able to appeal to the perception of contemporaries. Recall what Williams wrote commenting on the use of George and Jim's examples: "Over all this, or round it, and certainly at the end of it, there should have been heard 'what do you think?', 'does it seem like that to you?', 'what if anything do you want to do with the notion of integrity?'". How is it possible to hear these questions in a text of philosophy? It is possible insofar as the writer leaves open to the readers the possibility of appealing to their own perception of the moral life; it is possible insofar as he or she invites the readers to ask themselves: 'Is this what you see? Does it look like that to you? And if it does, is this the life you want?'.

In a sense, then, both Cavell's and Williams's critiques are *open*. They open up a space in which the readers can insert themselves and add their own perceptual, cultural, anthropological and intellectual baggage. Perhaps it is possible to imagine a person who, reading Stevenson's example of A and B and the promise at stake, would respond without hesitation that B must deliver the speech: that is, he must, *at all costs* (no matter how injured, whether he will show up at the event in a wheelchair, whether violently pressed by A's insistence). But we could ask this person: what kind of world do you live in? What kind of human relationships do you imagine? What is important to you? And his or her answers will be able to open a doorway into his or her world. To believe, however, that there is a fixed, stable, stylized moral world that moral theories are able to access reeks of philosophical fantasy — and of a philosophy that seeks to speak beyond its limits, the limits of the human condition.

Now, another element shared by this first presentation of Cavell's and Williams's philosophical styles is their focus on the "ordinary life" of people. Placing human actions in their ordinary, everyday context will be the order of the day in Cavell's and Williams's writing. However, this will not prevent them from combining the ordinary with the monumental (to use Williams's expression; or, to put it in Cavell's terms, the ordinary with the extraordinary). For instance, Williams in *A Critique of Utilitarianism* was able to make tragedy possible again (as opposed to utilitarian efforts to make it disappear from the scene) in examples of utterly ordinary features. George lives a life that could be that of any of us: the life of a young researcher, precarious, and more than others willing to compromise in order to guarantee happiness and stability for his affections.

This exercise in realism and everyday life, however, goes hand in hand with the elevation of the imaginative register to one of the main registers of philosophy. Indeed, in the economy of their philosophical style, Cavell and Williams display similar degrees of patience and impatience. Both are impatient with philosophical theorizing, guilty, in their view, of a fantastic, reductive, and fundamentally uninteresting representation of our moral life. However, this does not prevent them from displaying, instead, a high degree of patience for the use of the imagination. The various scenarios imagined by Williams (what will Jim do? Will he take up arms himself? Will he run away? Will he sacrifice himself? Will he save his own skin?) and Cavell's "storm of questions" in his rewriting of Stevenson's example aim precisely at stimulating our imagination — not only that, but they also aim to ask us, after the imagination has been activated, and is in circulation, the question Nietzsche posed at the close of *The Gay Science*: "Is that what you [readers] want?"[142]

So much for the similarities, the sharing of intentions, the affinities between the two philosophical styles. What is certain is that, reading Section 2.1 and Section 2.2, a rather alienating doubt remains: Cavell's and Williams's concerns may be similar. But it is hard to deny that the actual performance, the writing in its more concrete aspects (such as the presence of a questioning or assertive, sentimental or tragic tone) finds itself expressed differently.

For example, Cavell's tone is at times pathetic and sentimental, beyond being imaginative and literary. The choice of certain formulations can be cited to support this judgment: "Morality provides... a door through which someone, alienated or in danger of alienation from another through his action, can return by the offering and the acceptance of explanation, excuses and justifications"; "one can face the disappearance of justice from the world more easily than an amnesia of the very concept of justice". Or one can simply cite "the storm of questions" Cavell addresses to Stevenson: however much the intent of this storm may be shared by Williams, it becomes difficult to imagine (at least for a reader familiar with his philosophical writing) that this passage could have been written by him. By contrast, Williams comes across as drier and more epigrammatic, being no less imaginative (though perhaps, at times, less literary). Here again, a couple of formulations can help us immediately: "Smart's argument at this point seems to be

---

[142] F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882/1887), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 248. The introduction to the volume is by Bernard Williams: pp. vii–xxii.

embarrassed by a well-known utilitarian uneasiness, which comes from a feeling that it is not respectable to ignore the 'deep', while not having anywhere left in human life to locate it"; "Perhaps utilitarianism should lope off from an unprepared mankind to deal with problems it finds more tractable — such as that presented by Smart in a memorably Beckett-like image, of a world which consists only of a solitary deluded sadist".[143] The sharp humor of the last quotation is typical of Williams, and can be found in many of his texts. Now, though Cavell too is often ironic and humorous, it is hard to imagine those words being spoken in that way, and in that tone, by him.

These are first hints of something that will be discussed in the Introduction to Chapters Four and Five: namely, that they are two different types of philosophers, with different idiomatic styles, conquered in separate contexts and for separate reasons; looking at these differences, one will be able to observe not just how the similarity of style between Cavell and Williams has its limits, but also how the fact they share aims and intents — briefly: a certain metaphilosophy — can be contested. For the scope of this chapter, it sufficed to underline how both Cavell and Williams used their philosophical style as a weapon, and not just as an accessory device, but as a real critical device. In the next chapter I will investigate another of their weapons and I will call it "stylistic method". In Section 3.1 and Section 3.2 we will see how these stylistic methods will be guided by still common purposes; by a common metaphilosophy, that is alluded by the various headings of the Introduction to Chapter Three, e.g. *Therapy, Authority, and Expression* or *Professors and Thinkers*, which point at different areas where Cavell and Williams seem to be in metaphilosophical agreement (and which will be discussed more thoroughly in the course of the whole next chapter). However, paradoxically enough, the configuration of the stylistic methods of Cavell and Williams will be very different, even opposite. This will teach us how style and metaphilosophy do not coincide; they are closely related dimensions, certainly, but their relationship is more complex, more dialectical. As we shall see, there are cases where, for common metaphilosophical purposes, authors end up adopting different styles. For the sake of introducing these metaphilosophical themes — such as the need for a therapeutic philosophy, or for posing the question of authority in philosophy and finding expressive means to cope with it; as well as the importance of being "thinkers" and not just "professors" — let us give the word to Herr Keuner first.

---

[143] *Utilitarianism: For and Against, cit.*, p. 146.

3. Chapter Three: Stylistic Methods

3.0 Introduction

So the demand that moral and political philosophy should sound right, should speak in a real voice, is not something arbitrarily imposed by those with a taste for literature, or for history, or for excitement. It follows from philosophy's ideal of reflectiveness, an ideal acknowledged in the subject's most central traditions.

There are, undeniably, problems associated with philosophy's becoming a profession — problems shared, to some extent, by all the humanities — but they do not show that there is something wrong with the idea of philosophy as a discipline. The hopes that still exist for philosophy as an enlightening and constructive discipline are threatened by its being made into an academic routine, just as they are by its being advertised as offering instantly accessible help. In both cases, what philosophy loses is a quality which is essential to it, whatever questions it is addressing: an intense attention to what it is saying, and to the question whether what it is saying is not only true, but rings true. In this sense, good philosophy (or, at least, very good philosophy) on any theme will display some kind of urgency or intensity, and routine philosophy will lack it.

Bernard Williams

In taking on Emerson's view of thinking I will not be interested to advocate his view over, nor much to characterize it against, views more familiar to us (say a view of reason as rationality) but rather to ask attention to an attitude toward or investment in words that Emerson's view seems to depend upon, an attitude allegorical of an investment in our lives that I believe those trained in professional philosophy are trained to disapprove of. The disapproval of the attitude interests me as much as the attitude itself. If, as professional philosophers, we were asked whether philosophizing demands of us anything we would think of as a style of writing, our answer, I guess, would waver, perhaps because our philosophical motivation in writing is less to defend a style than to repress style or allow it only in ornamental doses. In speaking of disapproval, accordingly, I am not raising a question of taste, of something merely not for us, but a question of intellectual seriousness and illicitness. However glad we may be to think of ourselves as intellectually fastidious, I do not suppose we relish the idea of ourselves as intellectual police.

Stanley Cavell

The Need for Style

At the beginning of the *Stories of Mr. K.*, one of Bertolt Brecht's literary alter ego, Mr. K. (Herr Keuner, in German), meets a philosophy professor:

> A philosophy professor came to see Mr. K. and told him about his wisdom. After a while Mr. K. said to him: "You sit uncomfortably, you talk uncomfortably, you think uncomfortably." The philosophy professor became angry and said: "I didn't want to hear anything about myself but about the substance of what I was talking about." "It has no substance," said Mr. K. "I see you walking clumsily and, as far as I can see, you're not getting anywhere. You talk obscurely, and you create no light with your talking. Seeing your stance, I'm not interested in what you're getting at.[144]

"What's wise about the wise man is his stance" is the name of the book's opening story. Mr. K. is not the kind of person with whom one would feel safe and comfortable, and Brecht stresses this aspect of his character from the outset. Perhaps Mr. K. is only the *ensemble* of the traits of his character: neither his age, nor his origin, nor his physical characteristics are described throughout the book. *Stories of Mr. K.* is more a collection of parables — paradoxical often times — than a collection of short stories. What is the moral of this opening parable? As is the case with most, if not all the parables written in this short book, it is hard to tell.

However, let us focus on what the protagonists of this opening story tell us. We do not hear the philosophy professor's discourse on wisdom, the first thing we hear is the direct discourse of Mr. K., which begins with a reproach: "You sit uncomfortably, you talk uncomfortably, you think uncomfortably". But should this be read as a reproach? The context of the utterance seems to suggest it, even if it could be read as an observation, a (rather sharp) description of the professor's stance, which has manifested itself during the previous discourse on wisdom.

Let us read again Mr. K.'s comment, this time separating its parts: 1) "You *sit* uncomfortably": from this observation, we might think that the philosophy professor does not sit still, that he moves a lot; or, alternatively, that he is too rigid ('uncomfortably' could describe both, for Mr. K. has not said whether he moves too much or whether he moves too little); 2) "You *talk*, you *think*

---

[144] B. Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner* (1965), San Francisco, City Light Books, 2001, p. 1.

uncomfortably": here a more readily comprehensible connection is to be found, that between the talking and the thinking of the professor — more comprehensible than the connection between talking, thinking and *sitting*. In fact, thinking expresses itself normally through oral or written language, and that is platitudinous enough: how would one know if the other thinks uncomfortably if not through the vocal (or written) expression? (Maybe through one's posture?)

We have the feeling that there is no necessary connection between the physical and the mental (expressed orally, or in the writing) stances of the philosophy professor; to some extent, they have to be judged separately. Why would sitting have anything to do with talking and thinking? Is this connection but a sheer exaggeration? Sure, we do not want to overestimate Mr. K.'s remarks, we only want to indicate the one thing that links all three stances (whether physical or mental): they all point to *the movements* of the professor and can be rephrased in this concentrated remark: "You *move* uncomfortably" (or: "Your style is uncomfortable").

Mr. K.'s remark (and we can notice that, at this point, Mr. K. has only made that remark, mentioning nothing about the substance of the discourse) makes the philosophy professor *angry*. Why? Maybe the professor is simply annoyed by Mr. K's sharpness of judgment or maybe (and more probably, hearing the professor's subsequent response) *he* fears that *he* does not possess the wisdom in question (Brecht does not write if the professor is a man or a woman — I imagine him as a man); as if he is avoiding the thought that the substance he is conveying actually depends on *his* manner, *his* stance, *his* style of delivery. In this light, we can read again the beginning of his reply to Mr. K :"I didn't want to hear anything about myself": but if he is not actually involved in what he is saying, why has he used the expression "I didn't want to"? (More impersonal expressions would have been "The point is not", "The question is not"...). What if his wish not to be implicated, not to be a part of his discourse on wisdom was what gave it that *uncomfortable* style?

In this regard, let us take into account Mr. K.'s third and last reply: "I see you *walking* clumsily": but wasn't the professor sitting? As I read it, that has to do again with the movement of his discourse, more exactly with the *direction* of it ("As far as I can see, you're not getting anywhere"). It is as if Mr. K is saying to the professor: "Your discourse has no direction, no motivation", and the

professor admits this, when he claims that he is not involved in what he is talking about. In fact, a possible direction would depend on him, but he thinks that he is not the origin, not a part of his discourse; and, let us repeat that, we can perhaps suggest that this is the very fact that renders his movements uncomfortable.

Thus, the first story of Mr. K. ends in dissatisfaction: Mr. K. interrupts the exchange with the professor, he is not *interested* anymore. The professor had no grip over Mr. K., and he ends up being even more dissatisfied than Mr. K.. In fact, it is the professor who paid a visit to him, *he* wanted to express his wisdom to him, and *he* failed. But why is it that the professor wanted to share his wisdom with Mr. K. if he wasn't disposed to convey it (say adjust it, or shape it) in a way to let the interest of his listener grow? (Was it out of sheer vanity that the professor visited Mr. K.?)

It may be that Brecht agrees with Thoreau about their present ages. As Thoreau famously claimed: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers". Although, he also famously added: "Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live".[145] Brecht may have begun *Stories of Mr. K.* with the encounter between Mr. K. and the philosophy professor inspired by a similar admiration for the profession of philosophy. But, as Mr. K. showed him (and us), it is a profession with its own risks — especially if one wants to express one's thinking to others who are not philosophy professors. To *speak* to them (at least, some of them), one needs style.

Therapy, Authority, and Expression

At this stage — if we are not annoyed by Mr. K. too — we could begin to see how Mr. K. could actually be helping the philosophy professor (if only the philosophy professor listened to his own words). But who is Mr. K.? He is not only one of Bertolt Brecht's alter egos, but he is, oddly enough, one of his *sons*, one of his creations. There is another one of the *Stories of Mr. K.*, called *The best style*, that relates to this: "The only thing that Mr. Keuner said about style is this: 'It should be quotable. A quotation is impersonal. Who are the best sons? Those whose deeds make one

---

[145] H. D. Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

forget the father!'".[146] Mr. K. is the son that makes forget his father, Bertolt Brecht, in that he has a life of his own. (Do the writings that lack style also not have a life of their own?)

Sure, Mr. K. is a creation of Bertolt Brecht, but this fact does not add anything interesting to what we already knew before. We could add something interesting if we mention the fact that the word *Keuner*, in the South German dialect (the German equivalent would be *Keiner*), means *nobody*. Walter Benjamin, one of the few intellectuals who wrote on *Stories of Mr. K.*, made the hypothesis that Keuner relates to the Greek Word κοινός (common).[147] It is an interesting guess. As it is equally interesting that the South German word Keuner is so close to the German Keiner. What is more, the absence of any personal history, age or origin, makes even more plausible the possibility for interpreting Mr. Keuner as a Mr. Nobody (to unite both Benjamin's and my own characterizations, Mr. K. would be an "Herr für Alle und Keinen").

Let us now focus on Mr. K.'s very peculiar ways of intervening and let us see how they could be associated with the ways of *therapy*: for he lets the interlocutor talk (in this sense he is firstly *nobody*, pure listening, just like a therapist) and, only after the interlocutor has expressed himself, he focuses on something particular (often unexpected), in order to allow his interlocutors to recognize something on their own about what he has just said. In this sense, we can look at another example, again from *Stories of Mr. K.*, which can help us to illuminate some crucial features and themes (as therapy, but also authority and expression) of most of the stories. The following story is called "Who knows whom?":

> Mr. Keuner questioned two women about their husbands. The first gave the following information: "I lived with him for twenty years. We slept in the same room and in the same bed. We ate our meals together. He told me about all his business deals. I got to know his parents and frequently met all his friends. I knew all his illnesses, the ones he knew and several more besides. Of all those who know him, I am the only one who knows him best". "You know him, therefore?" asked Mr. Keuner. "I know him".

---

[146] *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, cit., p. 76.

[147] W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, edited by M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, G. Smith, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972/1999, p. 367.

Mr. Keuner asked a second woman about her husband. She gave the following information: "Often he did not come here for a long time, and I never knew whether he would come here again. He has not come here for one year now. I do not know whether he will come here again. I do not know whether he comes here from well-to-do houses or from the harbor alleys. I live in a well-to-do house. Who knows whether he would come to me in a poor one? He tells me nothing, he talks to me only about my concerns. These he knows very well. I know what he is saying, do I know what he is saying? When he comes here he is hungry sometimes, but sometimes he has eaten his fill. But he does not always eat when he is hungry, and he does not refuse dinner when he has eaten his fill. Once, when he came here he had a wound. I bandaged it for him. Once he was carried in. Once he chased everyone out of my house. When I call him a 'dark master' he laughs and says: if something is not there, it's dark, but if it's there, it's bright. But sometimes he turns somber at being addressed like this. I do not know whether I love him. I..." "Don't say anymore," said Mr. Keuner hastily. "I can see that you know him. No human being knows another better than you know him".[148]

Let us ask again: who is Mr. K.? What does he want, not only from his interlocutors, but from the readers? Mr. K. provokes us to look towards a different direction, the one we would not expect to be right, to be appropriate (in this sense, the parables are *paradoxical*): the first woman knows his husband in a very general, common use of the term (she spends a lot of time with him, she is part of his daily routine, she knows his business, his parents...); the second woman repeatedly claims that she does not know ("I never knew", "I do not know", "who knows", "do I know...?"...). However, according to Mr. K., she *does* know; not only, she *knows* her husband better than the first woman knows hers. Of course, one could see in this parable a mere provocation, in the spirit of some radical claims that we might sometimes utter, but never fully embody in our daily, ordinary practice; or, alternatively, one could see in the latter parable a simple critique of marriage and, in the former, a simple critique of professional philosophy. What I am trying to identify are, by contrast, the common features that this story shares with the opening story (and with most of Mr. K.'s stories). A first feature is the following: the people encountered by Mr. K. seem to be doing something we already mentioned (although not yet explicitly): *they seem to be hiding* — and for good reasons, for

---

[148] *Stories of Mr. Keuner, cit.*, pp. 74–75.

why should they have to be judged by him? But Mr. K., as we already said, is Mr. Nobody. His role (in these two stories, at least) is to let the interlocutors speak and reveal something about themselves. The poor victims of *Stories of Mr. K.* did not choose to encounter him, they just had bad luck — or good luck, if Mr. K. is able to actually help them listen to themselves; they did not search for Mr. K., and he sometimes seem more an antagonist than a therapist to them. (But aren't sometimes antagonists therapeutic? Wasn't Socrates's therapy sometimes agonistic? In this sense, Nietzsche wrote that "sometimes to find an enemy is better than to find a friend".)[149]

The analogy between Mr. K. and a therapist is illuminating only to a certain extent. Another analogy worth pursuing is that between Mr. K. and the second woman. They are both *poor figures* (in the sense of bearer of something poor), although the focus of both is different: in the first case what is wanting is *wisdom*; in the second case what is wanting is *knowledge*. What do Mr. K. and the second woman — let us call her Barbara, from ancient Greek βάρβαρος, "the one who does not know, the stutterer" (in matters of love) — have in common?

Let us dwell on Mr. K. again, as he is presented in the first parable. Mr. K. knows that the professor does not get the right style for his discourse, for the reasons we mentioned: he does not move — his sitting, talking, thinking do not move — in the right way (we imagined him moving either too much or too little); he thinks that he could get rid of subjectivity when talking about wisdom; and, most importantly, he *denies* the importance of all these two features of his style, he does not want to hear anything about them, does not want to recognize any truth in Mr. K.'s remark. However, what does Mr. K. know? For if he judges the movements of the professor as bad movements, then he should know something about the good ones. — We can in fact imagine the professor taking his revenge: "What do you know, Mr. K.? And do not tell me 'Nothing', do not tell me that you only know that you do not know: I've heard too many philosophers taking that ancient pose". But there truly is a way in which Mr. K. does not know anything: he does not tell us anything positive throughout the story, we do not hear from him what would be the right way of talking about wisdom. His teaching seems then to be mostly negative: he points at what is wrong in others

---

[149] *The Gay Science, cit.*, p. 14.

discourses, he identifies the wrong features, and then the story is over. That seems too negative (and schematic) a teaching.

However, Mr. K. knows something about style that seems to be very precious. We can hear his warning as something like: "Look at your movements, do you really think that you can talk about wisdom in that way, moving like that? Isn't your style revealing that you don't possess wisdom at all?". The thought of Mr. K. seems to be: it is not really *wisdom* if it does not succeed in expressing by itself its power: "You have no authority, professor". — Mr. K. did not say something like that out loud but if he had, it would have made a point about authority, an authority strictly related with the *how*, and with the *who* of the discourse.

Focusing on the importance of the *who*, on the source of wisdom, *Stories of Mr. K.* seems to have anticipated one common frustrated expectation of academic philosophy, nicely expressed by Richard Rorty (1931-2007) in relation to the Anglo-American context when he wrote:

> Sometimes, in some moods, even the best professorial prose sounds phony. The typical academic's presentation of self — as humble servant of The Argument or of The Text, faithfully following wherever it may lead — seems defensive and self-deceptive. With growing impatience, one wishes that the author had told us why he or she bothered to write the book in the first place, why *this* seemed a project worth years of a human life, why the book is more than a move in a game learned in graduate school. "Lord, what would they say/Did their Catullus walk that way?"[150]

In the closing lines Rorty quotes a poem by William Butler Yeats. The lines of Yeats's poem, called "The Scholars", famously refer to the scholars that have not fully captured Yeats's way of doing poetry. In closing, Yeats makes a rhetorical question to the readers: "Lord, what would they say/Did their Catullus walk that way?". — He did not, he did poetry out of a different motive from what seems to be moving the modern scholars. A similar question could be asked to academic philosophers: "Lord, what would they say/Did their Socrates walk that way?". (It is interesting to

---

[150] "Philosophy of the Oddball", *cit*.

notice Yeats's use of the same metaphor of walking, which takes us back to Mr. K.'s remark on the "clumsily walking" of the professor.)

What about Barbara? We have already observed that she repeatedly claims that she does not know. While she is doing that, she is also doing something else: she is expressing her feelings towards her lover, letting us grasp her connection with him, *showing* us that she actually knows him. Her knowledge lies in the particulars, it is a kind of knowledge that is best expressed through what she actually knows about him — and again, the knowledge is poor, she is not certain that she knows him; knowing, for her, is not just a matter of listing common (or trivial) things about him (he is thus tall, that old, has so many siblings...); of course these are all important features that might partially constitute an exhaustive knowledge about this person, but they would not be important *to her* relationship with him. The self is certainly involved in *this* knowledge, and plays a fundamental role in distinguishing a generic from a personal knowledge.

Hearing Barbara we may not learn what love is in general, but we can hear what is her own loving relationship: that means waiting, doubting, trusting, accepting... No surprise that Mr K. is sympathetic to her, that he judges positively what she said. The words she used, in a sense, speak for herself; she stayed true to the complexity that a loving relationship involves, she did not hide, with her words she gave nothing more (and nothing less) than what she had to give; she was honest, and we trust her. I say that "we trust her" because of a connection that we have established with her (we? At the very least, Mr. K. and I, and whoever else trusts her expression). She manages to create this connection with us thanks to her *truthful expression*. The example of Barbara is also important if we want to grasp how this truthful expression can take unexpected turns, digressing and lingering ways, but nevertheless succeeds in delivering one's knowledge. There is a palpable honesty in the recounting of Barbara that is not conventional at all. It is intimate and lively, it *sounds* true.

"First pedagogical, then political, last poetic"

However, let us try and put ourselves in the shoes of the philosophy professor and of the first woman too. He could say (as he in fact briefly does) to Mr. Keuner: "It is the substance that

matters; not my manners, my style of presentation; I don't see what you mean when you say that 'I sit uncomfortably, talk uncomfortably or think uncomfortably'. Anyway, they are extrinsic features of my thought. What matters is the substance, not the style".

How can one respond to these claims? After all, Mr. K. is a very exigent interlocutor and we can imagine a more comprehensive and tolerant one, in order to understand the professor's concern. This imagined (and more accomodating) figure could recognize that the philosophy professor indeed has something relevant to say, to communicate, and that this relevance is not threatened by his delivery. For instance, the professor could try to explain to Mr. K. some logic or physics, and fail to; nonetheless, his failing would not threaten his wisdom altogether. That can be explained because the *self*, the *subject* is not part of the topic ("I didn't want to hear anything about myself") — he could get anxious in explaining logic to Mr. Keuner, and get confused, but he could try again and do better. Surely there were logicians who succeeded in being also great communicators, or great writers (think of Bertrand Russell); but that is an extrinsic feature of the topic. Logic does not change if one explains it better than someone else. Style can be relevant for having a more direct or enthusiastic or pleasurable access to the substance in question (to logic, for instance), but it does not alter the substance itself — because, as we observed, the *self* is not involved.

Now let us turn again to the marriage example: would we be ready to claim that what the first woman says, how she says it, is not important after all? That the words she chooses, the things she mentions, are only extrinsic to her relationship to this man? After all, she did those things with him, lived those years with him, knew his parents... But she speaks in a rather conventional way, not unlike how most married women would have spoken of their husbands: "We slept in the same room and in the same bed. We ate our meals together". Moreover, it is true (and also a fact of our experience) that, at some point of one's life, one could force oneself to do those things ("living, sleeping, eating together") and, at the same time, hate one's partner.

It is what might be called *the truthful side* that seems to be important for Mr. Keuner, both in the case of the philosophy professor's wisdom and in the case of the two women's knowledge. When the self is involved (either in professing philosophy or in loving somebody) what makes the practice

living is this kind of truthfulness, which cannot be taken for granted because of the institutionalized place one occupies (as a professor, or as a husband or wife). Wittgenstein famously claimed that he wanted "to lead words back *home*"[151]: and home, in this context, is a dimension that has to be reenacted, recreated all the time, on a daily basis, and that needs not, let us repeat that, to be taken for granted because of the place one occupies in an institution.

To lead words back home, as well as to build our home (or community), or our characters, we need to give them *style*. Otherwise, we will feel alienated from our own place, our own home, and our own position and role. In the two stories about Mr. K. that have been analyzed, something goes wrong when one does not pay attention to style: in the first case, the professor does not live up to the ambitions of his admirable profession; in the second case, the first lover does not live up to the needs of her loving relationship. And, in both cases, what went wrong could have gone better with the help of style.

Mr. K. has no personal history, he is not described physically, he does not even have a name — but he has character, he expresses his likes and dislikes, he acts exemplarily, every silence and every word of him means something, and he does not refuse to mean more that he actually wanted. He has the kind of *intensity* mentioned by Bernard Williams in the epigraph of this Introduction: he has (and cultivates) an intense attention to what he says (and requires a similar attention from the people he encounters); and he is very well aware, as Williams recommends, that what he is saying not only is true, but *rings* true. His thought has style because its words, and their order, and their context, are carefully chosen (his thought is *stylish*, in the sense of elegant, which comes from *eligere*, that means "to choose").

It may be Mr. K.'s attention to style that made Brecht opt to attribute to him the title of *der Denkende*, the thinker. In the contemporary age, there may be no more philosophers, but there surely are thinkers. What is more, there can be remarkable thinkers, whose thoughts leave a mark in our lives, whose words stay with us, and are impressed in our minds and heart, and make us change. (Every remarkable thinker may be, in this sense, *therapeutic*.) It was Bertolt Brecht's original aim to

---

[151] *Philosophical Investigations, cit.*, §116.

construe Mr. K. as a remarkable figure. As Benjamin reports, Brecht inserted *Stories of Mr. K.* as part of his collections of *Versuche* (in English, attempts) and, in particular, *Stories of Mr. K.* was thought of as "an attempt to make gestures quotable".[152] But quoting Mr. K.'s gestures without *reading* them (ruminating and interpreting them) would not be enough and, as Benjamin again acutely observes, "Yet [Mr. K.'s] words need to be practiced — that is to say, first noticed, and then understood. They have first a pedagogical effect, then a political one, and last a poetic one."[153]

What better way of describing the effect of style in philosophy? The words and expressions chosen with style in philosophy (as in other disciplines) firstly have a pedagogical effect, in that they show us that it is possible to write (and to teach) philosophy in a different, more lively, way; secondly, the political effect is that of contrasting an hegemony that always arises in every institutionalized field — and a dissonant voice heard in a hegemonic context paves the way for showing alternative roads; finally, the poetic side contributes to attenuating the equation between philosophy and the sciences, and it encourages the exchange between philosophy and the arts.

Professors and Thinkers

All these introductory words were meant to introduce a fictional contrast between professors and thinkers. This contrast was an obvious feature of the opening parable of *Stories of Mr. K.*, where a professor of philosophy and Mr. K. "the thinker" were presented. Less obviously so in the second story, where the two married women are presented neither as professors nor as thinkers. Nevertheless, their speeches were precious for identifying a feature that permeates the contrast between professors and thinkers: in a schematized picture (as, in the end, with all its beauty, the opening story of Mr. K. is), the professors are *philistines*, with deadened senses, a little tired, conventional; while the thinkers are fresh, brilliant, and intense; in two words: *more truthful*. What was the aim of representing this stereotypical contrast?

---

[152] *Benjamin's Selected Writings. Volume 2*, *cit.*, p. 366.

[153] *Ibidem*.

The aim was to set the stage for introducing two intermediate figures between those of the philistine professor and the intense thinker. These two intermediate figures are not fictional anymore and, institutionally, they occupy an academic position. What is more, they taught in some of the most hegemonic Universities of both Great Britain and the U.S., for instance in Oxford and Cambridge, Berkeley and Harvard; they had to follow routines that are not as exciting as the encounters of Mr. K. (or of Brecht and Benjamin, for that matter); they both stand there, marking the epigraph of this Introduction, and continually reminding us of the importance of style in philosophy. Unsurprisingly, they are Bernard Williams and Stanley Cavell.

Even though they covered the role of professors all their lives, they also did not disdain engaging very thoroughly, and for the period of a lifetime, with works of *thinkers* such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein — and Emerson, in the case of Cavell. (It may be useful to repeat that the distinction between professor and thinkers is admittedly schematic and risks becoming only stereotypical. Anyway, like all stereotypes it contains some obvious truths: professors are obliged by academic duties, as they are constrained by a *decorum*; thinkers are more free, they may write in exaggeration and overstatement. This may be part of the literary figure which they aim to create: Nietzsche as a dynamitard, Wittgenstein as a mystic. A motto for them may be Emerson's *chiusa* of a *Fate*'s paragraph: "That is a little overstated — but may pass".)[154]

The aim of the following two sections will be to investigate two different literary strategies (I call them "stylistic methods", challenging the idea that style and methodology must go separated) used by Williams and Cavell — and bearing some affinities with similar literary strategies of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein respectively — in order to distance themselves from a typically Anglo-American way of writing philosophy in an academic context. In fact, both were challenging the idea that philosophy consists only in delivering *arguments*. And, as the professional philosopher knows, in the case of arguments there is no talking about style: if it is sound, it is sound, no matter the style (which can in fact be judged a pure matter of *taste*).

---

[154] R. W. Emerson, *Political Writings* (1860-1876), edited by Kenneth Sacks, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 210.

In this sense, let us remember the complaint of the philosophy professor: "I didn't want to hear anything about myself but about the substance of what I was talking about.". Well, if one wants to bring philosophy back to life one must *want* to hear something about himself or herself: in other words, one has to develop some *idiomatic style*. This was what Williams and Cavell tried to do, and in fact the peculiarity of their styles was immediately noticed by the reviewers of their works. Interestingly, different reviews converged in describing Williams's style as *compressed* and Cavell's style as *digressive*. — And I will claim that this is not an incidental feature of their work, but rather an explicit *stylistic choice* made by them. A choice matured through time, and influenced by the styles of those thinkers (like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein) which they admired the most. Investigating both Williams's compressed style and Cavell's digressive (or *lingering*, as I shall call it) style will then be a stepping stone for, more broadly, understanding what might be called 'the problem of style in philosophy'.

In particular, we will see how, in their philosophical works, *every word matters.* This is another criterion of Emersonian perfectionist writing that I see embodied in Cavell's and in Williams's production. In a way, through their stylistic methods, we will see how both philosophers responded to the challenge posed by Mr. Keuner to the philosophy professor. Every *movement* of them — not just every word, but every pause, every composition of words (sentences, paragraphs....) testifies of them, and can grow the interest of interlocutors like Mr. K; an interlocutor who, as we saw, trusted more the lingering doubts of the second woman than the assertive claims of the first woman; and also an interlocutor who, speaking almost epigrammatically (in his attempt "to make gestures quotable") liked to provoke and to prod everyone he encountered.

However, let us remember that Mr. K. is a fictional character; it is more comprehensible, in fiction, to search for a condition where every word matters. Perfectionism — and I mean it, now, just in the ordinary sense — was, is, and allegedly will always be a characteristic of literature. (We could think of extreme cases, like David Foster Wallace, who spent a great deal of time discussing with his own

translators, pondering the choice of every single translated word).[155] What about philosophy? Well, in philosophy, a perfectionist attitude (even in the ordinary sense) is contestable. In fact, as we have already seen, in the 20th century there was at least a great tradition, like that of analytical philosophy, in which some of its members thought that they had "to get it right first and then add the style afterwards". In this vision, *not every word matters*.

Mr. Keuner would have probably disagreed with such a view; and so did Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams. But things become more interesting if we go and investigate in detail in what sense, for both Williams and Cavell, what I have called emphatically *the* problem of style was perceived as a real problem. For a philosopher sensitive to this major problem, concerning the crucial importance of style in philosophy, it makes sense to analyze very closely the words they employed. And so it was done for major philosophers like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. The aim of the next two sections, Sections 3.1 and 3.2, will be partly to trace some influences between *stylists in philosophy* (Nietzsche on Williams; Wittgenstein on Cavell), but mainly to see, more in depth, how two academic figures like Williams and Cavell, constantly threatened by the repression of style intrinsic to a certain view of professional philosophy (similar to the repression exercised by the professor of philosophy in Keuner's story), responded like Emersonian perfectionist writers, showing how, for them, the problem of style was a real problem and how every word matters.

---

[155] See, for instance, an interview with Martina Testa, who translated David Foster Wallace into Italian: https://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/altro/piano-quinquennale-martina-testa-intervista-alla-traduttrice-editor-sur-occ asione-delluscita-ragazza-donna-altro/#respond.

3.1 Compression: Nietzsche, Williams, and the Problem of Style

The free spirit as a relative concept. A man is called a free spirit if he thinks otherwise than would be expected, based on his origin, environment, class, and position, or based on prevailing contemporary views. [...] Incidentally, it is not part of the nature of the free spirit that his views are more correct, but rather that he has released himself from tradition, be it successfully or unsuccessfully. Usually, however, he has truth, or at least the spirit of the search for truth, on his side: he demands reasons, while others demand faith.

<div align="right">

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*

</div>

Introduction

"His work was often more like poetry than like standard philosophical prose, illuminating by elusive compressed signs" writes a well-known philosopher about a fellow well-known philosopher. Another reviewer agrees with this judgment, adding the need for re-reading this philosopher's work: "Much that he writes needs, as well as deserves, to be read more than once. Often this is because the slant of his attention and the insights he offers are novel; sometimes it is because he writes in an extraordinarily condensed, almost epigrammatic, style which leaves important implications to be worked out by the reader, not always (for me at least) with adequate guidance". Here we begin to grow some doubt: what seemed inevitably to be Nietzsche's writing, turns out to be something else, maybe more difficult to label (*almost* epigrammatic), in any case similar in spirit. A third reviewer gestures towards this very affinity: "He possesses a mind that is both flexible and muscular: open and imaginative on the one hand, rigorous and no-nonsense (and occasionally stinging) on the other. No one else can lance an opponent with a comparable twinkle in his eye". We are in the presence of a flexible and muscular mind that searches for an opponent and lances him with an *incomparable* twinkle in the eye. Incomparable to whom? To his contemporaries — to his origin, environment, class and position — which just looks different. And the distinctiveness of this look is identified by a fourth reviewer with a certain disdain for boredom: "His writing illustrates a distinct fear of the obvious, which he finds boring, and the passage from point to point is nothing if not swift. The book is dense with thoughts — it will be hard for a critic to find an important consideration or angle which is not at some time mentioned — but the passage among

them can be slightly breathtaking". If Nietzsche had read these reviews and did not know anything about this writer, perhaps he would have been interested in wanting to read him directly. And I think he would have also been interested in drawing the distinctions between his own and this kindred spirit's writing. However, these reviewers wrote a century after Nietzsche, and come from the anglophone world (in order, they are Martha Nussbaum,[156] Colin McGinn,[157] H. L. A. Hart,[158] and Simon Blackburn)[159]. These Anglo-American philosophers are all acknowledging that they are in presence of a distinctive fellow philosopher — an extraordinarily unusual English philosophical writer, Bernard Williams.

In her obituary of Williams, Martha Nussbaum continues: "He did not write aphoristically like the Nietzsche he so much admired, but his writing combined brilliant clarity with some of the properties of aphorism: vivid wit, terse enigmatic utterance, decoding left to the reader".[160] Some properties of aphoristic writing are cited by Nussbaum as Williams's favorite. And in an interview of 1983, we read Williams praising Nietzsche's style for his "dry aphoristic tone": "Nietzsche had many tones of voices and some I don't like at all. I don't like the high poetic tone of voice of Zarathustra. I like the dry aphoristic tone of voice; what he says in that tone seems to be quite extraordinary. It is in many ways revelatory philosophy".[161] We can understand with *tone* a certain manner of expression in speaking and writing. Williams thought that some tones Nietzsche adopted allowed his writing to be *revelatory,* and thought they were significant features of Nietzsche's philosophical enterprise (where this means that, if Nietzsche had said the same thing with a different tone — *high poetic* or *dry aphoristic* — he would have in fact said a different thing).

---

[156] M. Nussbaum, "Tragedy and Justice: Bernard Williams Remembered", *Boston Review* (October/November), 2003, 1–25.

[157] C. McGinn, "Isn't it the Truth?", *The New York Review of Books* (July 10), 2003, 70–73.

[158] H. L. A. Hart, "Who Can Tell Right from Wrong?", *The New York Review of Books* (April 17), 1986, 49–52.

[159] S. Blackburn, "Making Ends Meet: A Discussion of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*", *Philosophical books*, 27(4), 1986, 193–203.

[160] *Tragedy and Justice*, *cit.*, p. 1.

[161] B. Williams, "The Uses of Philosophy. An Interview with Bernard Williams", *The Centre Magazine* (November/December), 1983, 40–49, p. 42.

When we were still confused if Nussbaum's article referred to Nietzsche or to Williams, we read her praising the author's "elusive compressed signs". This section will provide a tour around some of those signs, seeing what we can come to if we look closer at the body (with all its surfaces and profundities) of Bernard Williams's texts. During this tour we will reflect on the use of *compression* as what might be called a *stylistic method*. Admittedly, this latter concept is slightly paradoxical, in that it seems to imply an oxymoron: we are not accustomed to think that the style can be part of the methodology the philosopher uses in order to achieve one's tasks; on the contrary, we seem to think that the style is a superficial aspect of philosophical writing (for instance, as superficial and extrinsic as the paper with which the book is printed), while we seem to think that the methodology is a central aspect (and, very plainly, we can understand with methodology a certain way of structuring one's work). An aim of this section is to show how style and method can go together, and how a philosopher can in fact use a *stylistic method* in one's writing in order to achieve some definite purposes. That is why we will look at the uses of compression in the works of Bernard Williams, with an excursus into Nietzsche's aphoristic writing.

Doing More with Less in Philosophy (and Music)

In a text that appeared in 2003, the year of his death, Williams will remind himself and his audience what he wanted to achieve in his writings and what he encouraged the new generations to achieve with their writings: "What has to be done with less [in philosophy] is — at the end of the line or, better, at the end of some lines — to speak truthfully to a real human concern, to something that could disturb or interest a grown-up person quite apart from any involvement in professional philosophy".[162] This is a very dense quote. Let us try slowly to unpack it. This quote is extracted from an article on a modernist composer, Leoš Janáček, and it is titled: "Janáček's Modernism. Doing Less With More in Music and Philosophy".[163] The very fact that Williams thinks music to be a good analogy to philosophy is interesting. In fact, they both have a structure; they both (unlike

---

[162] B. Williams, *On Opera*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 120.

[163] *On Opera*, *cit.*, pp. 118–120.

visual arts) unfold through time; but, most importantly, they both are expressive, and their being expressive is deeply connected to style.

Of course, Williams (and Janáček) wanted to do the exact opposite in philosophy (and music) of doing less with more, i.e. *doing more with less*. But how is it possible that we can do *more* only by *writing less*? It surely depends on what *less* is.[164] For instance, writing less can mean writing densely and intensely. A consequence of this kind of compressed writing is that it will achieve *more*: more thoughts are left to the reader to unpack and to reconstruct. Whereas a less dense presentation would have involved more words in the written text, but less afterthoughts for the reader's mind. The aim is: to *contain* the words in order to *encourage* the readers' thoughts. However, there is also another sense in which *more* could be interpreted: the effect on the reader is *more* powerful, the concern touched is *more* vital — and we are disturbed by it.

What Janáček managed to do in musical writing was to get rid of the transitions. The majority of classical composers did not opt for that solution, and that is why Janáček's music sounds distinctive: if we listen to Janáček we listen mostly to the powerful moments, without the transitions. Williams compares this operation in music to how Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus*. In fact, reading the *Tractatus* — as an old joke goes — we have the impression that Wittgenstein wrote just the conclusions and not the premises of his argument (while in the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* we have the impression that he wrote just the premises and not the conclusions). And there is a sense in which Williams's writing can be compared to the writing of the *Tractatus*: reading Williams (and Wittgenstein) we have to figure out ourselves how to connect the various sentences, which thoughts are supposed to be evoked or added at various points of the writing. (As Wittgenstein will write, in the same spirit of the *Tractatus*, in the *Preface* to the *Investigations*: "I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own".)[165]

---

[164] As we have seen in Chapter Two, a "less" also characterizes the schematic writing of Stevenson and Smart. But in a different way (and with a different awareness).

[165] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, *cit.*, p. 4. See also the Preface to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it

Sometimes writing philosophy is identified with a linear delivery of arguments; some other times philosophy is thought to be much more: and other philosophers, such as Williams, stressed the fact that in philosophy there is more than one way of *getting it right*. If the delivery of arguments is the sole measure of getting it right, all the other different styles of delivery become secondary, something that can be added afterwards, in order to shape an aesthetic surface of the solid argument. Needless to say, Williams disagrees with this claim: he stresses his disagreement in *On Hating and Despising Philosophy*,[166] which is a sort of *manifesto* of what he wanted to achieve in philosophy, and how. However, the *how* and the *what* seem to be oddly related. Making sense of the problem of style, as Nelson Goodman wrote, is both acknowledging the obvious truth and the obvious falsity of the distinction between the how and the what. Goodman in fact agrees with Graham Hough's motto: "A different way of saying the same thing is in fact saying a different thing".[167] If one takes problems of style seriously — as Williams did — one does not separate the style from the content in a very crude way (like the analytical philosophers who think that "style can be put in afterwards").

At first glance the idea of compression seems to go exactly in this misleading direction: it seems to make us think that one has a clear idea of what one wants to achieve (in music and philosophy), writes it down, and then suppresses some parts of it in order to give it a smaller size. It seems that one has a long argument (or movement, in music), or a long chain of propositions, and simply squeezes them in order to reduce the space of the delivery — leaving some sentences out. Same substance, just squeezed. There is something wrong with this picture. The point is: the mystery of compression is that it is not clear what has been compressed, and how. We have no clear idea of the size and the shape of the material compressed into a few sentences. (Unlike a document on the computer: where one can zip a file of a larger and definite size into a document of a smaller and

---

— or similar thoughts. It is not therefore a text-book. Its object would be attained if it afforded pleasure to one who read it with understanding". L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), translated by C. K. Ogden, New York, Dover Publications Inc, p. 27.

[166] *Essays and Reviews*, *cit.*, pp. 363–370.

[167] "The Status of Style", *cit.*, p. 800.

always definite size.) A better example would be, again, compression in music. For talking about this process of compression Janáček used the word 'thickening'. Let us read a passage from one of his letters: "This epilogue for *Brouček* displeased me. I have done it differently, cut it, thickened it, unified with the motif of the Housekeeper's indignation" (Letter to Roman Veselý, 18 Feb 1917). Without going into details of the musical opera *Brouček* mentioned by Janáček, we can try to summarize his aim: it was to give a certain passage more density, unifying different motives — in less space.

Just like the aim Williams set himself: "What has to be done … at the end of the line, or better, at the end of some lines … is to speak truthfully … to disturb … or interest…". If these three activities seem to be very different from each other, all the better: after all, there is more than one way of getting it right. As there is more than one way to write — than *just* delivering arguments. As in the case of thickening in the music of Janáček, the process of compression in the philosophy of Williams will be able to touch vital concerns, only by leaving something out. We said that Janáček left out the transitions, but what did Williams leave out? The reviews we brought to attention at the beginning of this section gave us some clues for answering the question: as Simon Blackburn wrote, Williams's writing leaves out the tiresomely obvious (Blackburn claimed that Williams has "a fear of the obvious";[168] he replied that he does not want "to belabor it")[169]; what is more, Williams's writing also leaves out many explanatory passages, and does something else instead, something smaller but with a different, at times more powerful, effect: something like *suggesting, inviting, and interrogating*. At least since the publication of *How to Do Things With Words* (1962) by J. L. Austin, the community of philosophers has grown an interest in looking at all the different things the speakers *do* in saying something; at what they *bring about* in saying it.[170] The odd thing is that this interest was not really accompanied by an analogous interest in looking at all the different *speech-acts* the philosophers themselves are performing in their writing. What is assumed (at least in

---

[168] *Making Ends Meet*, *cit.*, p. 194.

[169] *Ivi*, *cit.*, p. 203.

[170] J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Second Edition, edited by J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1975.

certain strains of contemporary analytical philosophy) is that the philosopher is mostly performing two speech-acts: that is, asserting and arguing. However, it looks like one can do a lot more things: as Williams observed of Nietzsche's writing, the philosopher can in fact *suggest*, *invite*, and *interrogate*.

In *Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology*[171] Williams wrote about Nietzsche that when we read him we have the impression that many times he is not *communicating* something but *urging the reader to ask himself a question*. The same counts for Williams. This is part of what he had in mind when, replying to Blackburn, he talked about "the arrogance of compression"[172] (which is a good reason to use this term at all — rather than using similar terms as *condensation*, or *thickening* — for referring to this process or to this, as I called it, stylistic method): a compressed text encourages or provokes the readers to add their own thoughts and to ask their own questions. But where does the arrogance come in? Certainly, it can be arrogant to ask somebody to ask herself a question (and this is an arrogance that Williams wanted to embrace). Anyway, apart from that, there is a form of arrogance that Williams himself thought to be illegitimate in philosophical writing: this arrogance comes in when the reader is required to do *all* the work, when she is not aided enough in the interpretation of the text. In these cases, as Williams admitted: "the reader [is required] to work unnecessarily, then all the more there has been a failure, and [when this happened] I very much regret it".[173]

Excursus on Nietzsche's Aphoristic Writing

Compression was also one of Nietzsche's ideals and stylistic methods of writing. In his philosophical enterprise, he found the possibility of doing more with less thanks to the form of the aphorism, which often contains compressed thoughts, sentences, maxims. In a note from 1876, Nietzsche writes:

---

[171] *Making Sense of Humanity*, *cit.*, pp. 65–76.

[172] *Making Ends Meet*, *cit.*, p. 203.

[173] *Ibidem*.

> A maxim is a link in a chain of thoughts: it requires the reader to restore this chain out of his own resources: in this respect, a great deal is required. A maxim is a presumptuous thing — Or it is an occasion for caution, as Heraclitus knew. In order to be savored, a maxim must first be stirred up and mixed with other matter (an example, experiences, stories). Most do not understand that and therefore one can express disturbing things quite innocuously in maxims.[174]

A period that is especially relevant to my research on compression is that between 1876 and 1881: the time when Nietzsche composes the three parts of *Human All Too Human* (first book, second book and the appendix *The wanderer and his shadow*). In this period Nietzsche ventures into aphoristic writing. This choice has various personal reasons: at that time Nietzsche is seriously ill, and in 1878 he will abandon his tenure as professor of philology in Basel and start wandering through Europe. His time for reading and writing is limited, and he often dictates what he writes to friends. *Human All Too Human* is famously subtitled *A Book for Free Spirits.* The free spirit Nietzsche searched for in that time of illness is found more in an approach, in a manner, in a style, than purely in a doctrine. And it is important to remember how the free spirits series is achieved with the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, published in 1887, or maybe with the *Twilight of the Idols. How to Philosophize with A Hammer* in 1888. Anyway, both represent the culmination of Nietzsche's search for an approach, a manner, a style for philosophy.

The style Nietzsche searched for and found in the period of *Human All Too Human* is expressed through the form of the aphorism. However, there are many ways in which an aphorism can be written. Let us limit ourselves to notice that not every aphorism achieves compression (as the short form more generally does not always achieve compression). In Nietzsche's *Human All Too Human* there are aphorisms that directly reflect on the value of compression; and there are others that just display compression; and others that do both, reflecting on compression and displaying it; and, of course, there are also cases in which Nietzsche does not do any of these things (because he does not want to do both of them or just because he fails to do the second, that is, writing a compressed aphorism — although it is even possible to fail to reflect on the value of compression).

---

[174] K. A. Pearson, *A Companion to Nietzsche*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 31.

Let us begin with one of the many reflective examples. I will take into account the Aph. 178 of the first book of *Human All Too Human*:

> 178. *The effectiveness of the incomplete.* — Just as figures in relief produce so strong an impression on the imagination because they are as it were on the point of stepping out of the wall but have suddenly been brought to a halt, so the relief-like, incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its exhaustive realisation: more is left for the beholder to do, he is impelled to continue working on that which appears before him so strongly etched in light and shadow, to think it through to the end, and to overcome even that constraint which has hitherto prevented it from stepping forth fully formed.[175]

This dynamic of compression seems to be at the heart of Aphorism 178, *The effectiveness of the incomplete*. In this particular aphorism, Nietzsche succeeds in reflecting on compression and in writing concisely. The means for compression here is a similitude: "Just as figures in relief…". This is a remarkable opening, which starts *in medias res*, and omits all the underlying reflections of Nietzsche. The image of the relief serves well Nietzsche's aim of describing the process of experiencing something which possesses a compressed form. During the act of compressing something, some parts of the object are left behind: from this dynamic it emerges the quality of *incompleteness*, which is strictly related to the compressed form. Examples of incomplete objects are reliefs. Reflecting on them and on our experiences of looking at them, Nietzsche aims at something which can also be present in philosophical writing. In fact he writes: "[An] incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its exhaustive realisation: more is left for the beholder to do [...]". The dynamic of compression involved in philosophical writing has then to do with putting in relief some thoughts — and leave a great deal of work to the reader. However, what are examples of just displayed compression in Nietzsche's *Human All Too Human*? I will take an aphorism from the end of the first book:

---

[175] F. Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human. A Book for Free Spirit* (1878-1880), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 92.

> 617. *Sowing and reaping with one's personal shortcomings*. — Men like Rousseau know how to employ their weaknesses, deficiencies and vices as it were as manure for their talents. If he bewails the depravity and degeneration of society as the deplorable consequence of culture, he does so on the basis of a personal experience; it is the bitterness deriving from this that gives to his general condemnation the sharpness of its edge and poisons the arrows with which he shoots; he unburdens himself first of all as an individual and thinks to seek a cure that, operating directly upon society, will indirectly and through society also be of benefit to him himself .[176]

In these lines, Nietzsche exaggerates the point he wants to make: he takes Rousseau as an example of a more general human tendency, what he calls "sowing and reaping with one's personal shortcomings". This process is described by Nietzsche as something hidden, shameful, human all too human: what we preach as the common good for humanity actually arises from what we desire as a cure for our personal illnesses. Aph. 617 is compressed for many reasons. Firstly, there is the similitude of the *manure* that helps reaching the effect searched. The thought is: we let our moral doctrine grow from our vices — like manure let flowers grow. Secondly, there is no precise reference to a passage in Rousseau's work, and the reader is left to wonder how Nietzsche came to this conclusion. Should we trust his sharp judgment? Isn't he just exaggerating? The same bitterness which is said to shape the sharpness of Rousseau's arrow is here shaping Nietzsche's aphorism. In fact, let us bear in mind the idea of *sharpness*. In few words we can hurt more than with a whole discourse. Granted the fact that our words, assembled in sentences, become *sharp, edgy*.

The choice of the adjectives here contributes to making the judgment particularly sharp: weakness and deficiencies; depravity and degeneration; bitterness, poison… Why this language? It is a language heavy with negative connotations. This *cutting* critique in fact is in line with Nietzsche's ideal, and in the second book of *Human All Too Human* we read: "157. *Sharpest criticism*. —We criticize a man or a book most sharply when we sketch out their ideal".[177] If we want to hurt somebody, then nothing is better than an arrow loaded with negative words, that goes directly to the *heart* of our opponent. (In the *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche will write: "It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book — what everyone else *does not* say in a

---

[176] *Human, all too Human, cit.*, p. 195.

[177] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 248.

book."[178] Here we can begin to see why it is so: sometimes, only *one look* can be sufficient to unravel an uncomfortable truth, which an author would have liked to hide in pages and pages — in a book.)

Compression and Decompression

Let us turn to Bernard Williams again and let us take a close look at the text of *A Critique of Utilitarianism* (1973). This is a well known text, particularly in the anglophone tradition. George and Jim stories are presented to and discussed with undergraduate students, alongside Williams's so-called "integrity objection". What is less often discussed, perhaps, is Williams's choice of the epigraph of *A Critique of Utilitarianism*: it is an aphorism of Nietzsche, taken from the *Twilight of The Idols* (namely, the part titled *Maxims and arrows*): "If we possess our *why* of life we can put up with almost any *how*. — Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that."[179] What is the reaction that this aphorism provokes (or, at least, that intends to provoke)? It is *laughter*, either simple or nervous. This aphorism makes us laugh because it is exaggerated — and, to some extent, unfair. But is it? The interesting fact about the final compressed bit (the bit written after the em-dash, written in order to surprise the reader, and make her laugh) is what happens when we start to think about it. For instance, one could think about it: "— Why does only the Englishman think that happiness gives meaning to life? — Well, because there are a lot of utilitarians in Great Britain. I wonder how many utilitarian writers there are in other countries. What if something that takes itself so seriously as the utilitarian enterprise were in fact deeply conditioned by something so human, all too human as the contingent and national origin of the writer?".

A feature of aphorisms, when they are properly compressed, is that they require an act of decompression; or, as Nietzsche wrote in the Preface to *On Genealogy of Morality*: "an art of interpretation".[180] We have to start ruminating the aphorisms, and Nietzsche suggests we have to

---

[178] F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 223.

[179] *Utilitarianism: For and Against, cit.*, p. 77.

[180] F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 9.

behave like *cows* in order to do that — ruminating quietly and slowly the leaves of grass of the aphorism. The fact that Williams puts this aphorism as an epigraph to *A Critique of Utilitarianism* may evoke various reflections. Did he want to mock utilitarians? Probably. Did he appreciate Nietzsche's compressed aphorism? This also seems to be the case. If we take Williams's choice seriously, then this aphorism becomes part of the text: it is part of the critique Williams employs against utilitarianism. It is meant to caricature utilitarianism, but it is also an occasion for us to reflect on the compressed text and invitation to decompress, to interpret it.

So let us try again more deeply, and slowly, to interpret the aphorism, focusing this time on the first part of it. "If we possess our *why* of life we can put up with almost any *how*. — Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that." What men actually do is to search for meaning in their life. In many essays, Williams writes about the *fundamental projects* and of (what he calls) the *categorical desires* as those projects and desires that build our attachment to life.[181] Like Camus, Williams thinks that the question of *suicide* is the apt place to start when reflecting about moral problems. "There is only one serious philosophical problem: this is suicide" is the famous, and concise opening of Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942). Williams takes up *Le Mythe de Sysyphe* at the outset of *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics* (1972), quoting Camus's remark that, if we think of suicide as an escape to making any decision whatsoever in one's life, then suicide inevitably comes "one decision too late".[182] However, if we don't commit suicide, then we have some reason to live (some *categorical desire*, as Williams will later put it). The thought is: if we have a *why* that keeps us alive, that makes us avoid suicide, then we can put up with almost any *how*.

This is the beginning of a possible decompression of Nietzsche's aphorism, placed as an epigraph to Williams's text. It is *my* decompression, and this decompression of this aphorism reveals who *I* am, my cultural and personal background: for instance, it reveals the way I relate Nietzsche to Williams (and to Camus), and it reveals my own reflections on the problem of suicide.

---

[181] *Problems of the Self*, *cit.*, pp. 82–100.

[182] *Morality*, *cit.*, pp. 3-4.

Stylistic Affinities

Right now I imagine a skeptic entering the scene and asking: "— Fine. However, what really matters in philosophical writing are the thoughts, not the superficial expression of them". — "What do you mean?", we could ask him — "I mean, the important thing about Nietzsche and Camus's sentences is the thought that lies behind them, not the way of expressing it" — "Really?".

This last question will hardly satisfy the skeptic, and that is why I will say some words more about what I previously called "the problem of style". At this point, it is important to recall a distinction: between those who write how they write and do not reflect on style as a problem and those who do reflect on style as a problem — and, consequently, search for the right one.[183] Most people do not think that style is really a problem for philosophy. If I had never read Williams, I would probably have been one of these people. What struck me about his writing is that he perpetually poses problems of style for philosophy. He is one of those philosophers who reflect on what the right style could be for writing philosophy. Williams poses this question very early in his philosophical writings, namely in the Preface to *Morality*.[184] And he admits that this question won't receive a *unique* answer. In fact, it is a question that must be confronted every single time, and answers can vary depending on the occasion.

For the purposes of this section, I am trying to show that certain stylistic choices of Williams bear an affinity to Nietzsche's. Williams admired Nietzsche but he did not want to write like him (and he claims this in different places — adding that it would be a very silly enterprise indeed, trying to imitate Nietzsche's style). Anyway, there are features of Nietzsche's compressed writing that Williams — consciously or not — embodied in his writing. (And not only in the sense that he put Nietzsche's aphorisms in epigraph to his texts; although another instance of this practice is to be found in the epigraph of *Truth and Truthfulness. An Essay in Genealogy*.)[185] For my purposes, I am limiting myself to aim at showing some connections, or elective affinities, between the Williamsian

---

[183] See, for instance, *infra* pp. 18–23. But see also Epilogue to Chapter Two and Introduction to Chapter Three.

[184] *Ivi*, cit., pp. xviii–xix.

[185] B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness. An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002.

and the Nietzschean spirit, starting from the image they used for describing their philosophical style.

Let us think about the famous Nietzschean image of 'doing philosophy with a hammer'. In the Preface to the *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche explains what he means with this metaphor: touching something, with the help of a little hammer, in order to feel if the object is real or fake — by listening to the sound it makes.[186] The aphorism on the search for happiness and the Englishman is in line with this procedure: the first sentence affirms something more general and universal, something that affects every human life; contrasted with that, the Englishman's search for happiness appears to be merely an *idle* something that is worshipped only in Great Britain — an object of faith which Nietzsche's tiny hammer *exposed*.

Bernard Williams, in the Preface to *Moral Luck*, uses a similar image to describe a method he used in the essays collected in the book. Williams writes that he has sometimes used the "crude method of prodding" moral thought to see if it was dead or alive.[187] This is a revealing expression. For instance, let us imagine a doctor prodding the knee of the patient. She may use a *tiny hammer* (the object involved in prodding cannot be too big) to do it; she then looks at the reaction of the knee, and watches whether it moves. This operation is only a part of the treatment: or, better, the *preliminary* part. If the knee moves then the doctor can start thinking how to operate on it, and where. If it does not move, then either it requires an operation of another kind, or simply to stop insisting on prodding it. Accepting that the nerve is dead, in the most tragic example. (Animals often prod other animals in order to look if they are alive, in order to proceed then in the hunting. This example makes us think that we can often fail in prodding something. The matter may not move but that does not mean it is dead: it may mean that *we* failed in diagnosing its condition.)

I will take what I think to be an example of *prodding* from the very first essay of *Moral Luck*, i.e. *Persons, Character and Morality*:

---

[186] *Twilight of the Idols, cit.*, pp. 155–56.

[187] *Moral Luck, cit.*, p. x.

> After an illuminating discussion of the question why, if at all, we should give priority of resources to actual and present sufferers over absent or future ones, [Charles Fried] writes:
>
> "surely it would be absurd to insist that if a man could, at no risk or cost to himself, save one or two persons in equal peril, and one of those in peril was, say, his wife, he must treat both equally, perhaps by flipping a coin.
>
> One answer is that where the potential rescuer occupies no office such as that of captain of a ship, public health official or the like, the occurrence of the accident may itself stand as a sufficient randomizing event to meet the dictates of fairness, so he may prefer his friend, or loved one. Where the rescuer does occupy an official position, the argument that he must overlook personal ties is not unacceptable."
>
> The most striking feature of this passage is the direction in which Fried implicitly places the onus of proof: the fact that coin-flipping would be inappropriate raises some question to which an 'answer' is required, while the resolution of the question by the rescuer's occupying an official position is met with what sounds like relief (though it remains unclear what that rescuer does when he 'overlooks personal ties'— does *he* flip a coin?).[188]

Here Williams is prodding the idea of moral impartiality. This is one of the many examples of anglophone moral philosophy which imply 'one thought too many'. Williams's answer to those moralists is simple and straightforward: *I will save my wife because she is my wife*. Is this an offense to moral impartiality? Without these attachments we would not be able to live a life that would make sense to us. The final rhetorical question, inserted after the em-dash, is meant to express concisely the absurdity of such line of thought — a line of thought that, after that rhetorical question, is abruptly interrupted by Williams. Pushing reflections further would be absurd.

However, let us take the reaction of Williams's teacher in Oxford, Richard Hare, who in the same period of *Moral Luck* published his *Moral Thinking* (1981). In the middle of the book, Hare talks about Williams having challenged him on television on a similar example:

> To take a pasteboard example with which I was once confronted by Professor Bernard Williams on television: you are in an air crash and the aircraft catches fire, but you have managed to get out; in the burning plane are, among others, your son and a distinguished surgeon who could, if rescued, save many

---

[188] *Moral Luck*, *cit.*, p. 17.

injured passengers' lives; to say nothing of those whose lives he would save in his subsequent career. You have time to rescue only one person.

It is hard to make Williams's example realistic. How do you know he is so distinguished a surgeon—perhaps he was only shooting a line when you struck up an acquaintance in the departure lounge? Has he got his tools with him, and can he do any more for the injured people than the first aid which the crew are trained to give (which probably prescribes keeping them warm and immobile and giving some common drugs which, we hope, they managed to extract from the aircraft)? How promising is your son's future (he can probably look forward to a greater span of it than the surgeon)?[189]

Williams's story is constructed in order to challenge utilitarian thought. In this sense, Hare's response is revealing: Hare does not stop his line of thought; instead he continues to insist on a case which in Williams's view would have required a straightforward answer. It is as if Williams wanted to show what goes wrong when we push reflection further on the issue. The thought underlying Hare's reflection seems in fact to be *perverse*; and there is something corrupting in asking oneself: "How promising is my son's future?". In this sense, I think it is also quite revealing to cite an answer that Williams gave at the Q and A of *The Human Prejudice*, a talk he held at Princeton in 2002 — quite revealing because it shows Williams's *compressed style*. In fact, it sounds as though it is a response that he could have *written*, due to the eloquence with which he delivers it. The question from the public is:

Q: "When someone acts inhumanly, what is it that they have lost, or what is it that they have become? Because they have not become an animal and they have not become an alien...". A: "That's right... It's a very very good question and I think there are a lot of complex answers to it. And... when they behave *inhumanly*, interestingly, as you absolutely rightly say, it doesn't mean that they act like an animal: for instance, they don't destroy something in rage typically if they act *inhumanly*. What they typically do is that either they behave like a machine or a disembodied intelligence — *and one way of acting inhumanly is to act on certain kinds of principle*".[190]

---

[189] R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking. Its Levels, Method, and Point*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981, p. 138.

[190] B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice. Talk at Princeton with Q and A*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2YN7s7V82w&fbclid=IwAR1eG6mdOFFRWAVF5SkBrYR2DktiqOXsvCd-g LmltU5a7mkovaAE1p5xXbQ, 2002.

This is an excerpt from Williams's talking and it bears all the features of the spoken language. Repetitions of words, pauses, smiles and concentrated looks…

Anyway, it is only the last sentence that will make Williams prompt in a *laugh* (he laughs at his own words, the audience only partially laughs with him, as if reminding us of the threat of choosing the right line — as the punchline for jokes). Writing the transcript of Williams's answer I separated the last line from the others with an em-dash, a tool that Nietzsche frequently uses in order to separate the compressed bit that can accomplish many things: it can touch the heart of the problem, exaggerate the matter, overturning or parodying it.

Let us imagine the skeptic again: "— Fine. Some lines can affect the audience in different ways than others (although I still think that if Williams had said that at the beginning of his answer, absolutely not much would have changed). But why are these lines similar to Nietzsche?". The skeptic has a point. Williams was a very prolific writer and his most incisive lines do not always bear affinities with Nietzsche's writing. Nietzsche's writing was taken by Williams as a model of how philosophers (either in the analytical or in other traditions) must accept the fact that *they can fail as literature fails.*[191] A novel can be prolix and push away the audience, or ruin the matter it is examining; a certain joke can fail to strike the right tone, or to choose the right punchline.

As Williams writes in *What Might Philosophy Become?* (1997) philosophers like Nietzsche and Wittgenstein (and, he adds, Stanley Cavell) can help remind us that *the philosopher must listen to what she says.*[192] This is another *compressed maxim*: much is left for us to discern what Williams could have had in mind, or what he wanted us to think about it. This is a reflective attitude and it is in some sense unnatural, and it would surely be utterly unnatural if a person who speaks to us would constantly listen to what she says. The point is: when we speak, we do listen to what we say — but not all the time. By contrast, in the writing we have to listen to what we say. For instance, we have to realize if someone else is speaking through us (like the superego composed by "a blend of their most impressive teachers and their most competitive colleagues", as Williams writes in

---

[191] *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline, cit.*, p. 212.

[192] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 207

Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline).[193] The ideal is a kind of writing that makes sense to me in the first place. *I* mean it. And to explain why I mean everything I mean is a hard business — a business that has *partly* to be done if one wants to have an audience at all.

However, taking as a principle that in writing "we must write as if to be never misunderstood by others" (Quintillian's maxim, cited approvingly by Simon Blackburn)[194] is to take a false picture of what writing is, what reading is, and of what interpreting is. Here comes into play the obscurity of our work if we made things clear that way in first instance to *us*. "The elusive compressed signs" are those signs that make us touch *our* limits. In this sense, I will take one last example from *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*:

> For those who do not believe in a religious ethics, there is some evasion in continuing to argue about its structure: it distracts attention from the significant question of what such outlooks tell us about humanity. Nietzsche's saying, God is dead, can be taken to mean that we should now treat God as a dead person: we should allocate his legacies and try to write an honest biography of him.[195]

Here Williams is talking of a possible evasion of religious ethics. In criticizing it, Williams takes up Nietzsche's saying "God is dead" and delivers what is in fact a possible extension of that paradoxical thought. This extension is not only an example of compression but more generally of what Williams called *imaginative writing*.[196] We have to wonder what "allocating the legacies of God" and what "writing an honest biography" might mean. Better phrased: this is an example of imaginative writing that uses compression as a means. In fact, this is the closing statement of the paragraph and Williams will not return to this image, which is left to the reader to ponder.

Williams's appropriation of Nietzsche is part of what Pierre Bourdieu called the "international circulation of ideas":[197] in fact, Williams used Nietzsche as an ally to distance himself from an

---

[193] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 183.

[194] S. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, p. v.

[195] *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, cit.*, 38.

[196] *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline, cit.*, p. 205.

[197] P. Bourdieu, "Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociale*s, 145, 2002, 3–8.

English tradition of moral philosophy (like some French philosophers in the 20th Century has used Heidegger to distance themselves from a dominant French tradition). What is more, Williams used not only Nietzsche, but a *style* similar to Nietzsche — in its *compression, incisiveness, and humor* — as a tool for freeing himself from a certain English tradition; for instance, the tradition taken into account in *A Critique of Utilitarianism* (1973), *Moral Luck* (1981) and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), of those English philosophers fixated with happiness or with delivering 'one thought too many'.

In the course of this section I have tried to unpack a sense in which part of Williams's writing was Nietzschean. Both Williams and Nietzsche in fact used compression as a stylistic method for doing more with less in philosophy. And, in particular, Williams used compression for many different reasons: not only in order to free himself from an English tradition, but also to give relevance to all the other *speech-acts* (other than asserting and arguing) that philosophical writing can encompass.

What is interesting (and I have partly tried to show it) is that Williams found in Nietzsche something that he was already doing: in this sense I talked of a stylistic kinship, for which I have used Goethe's term affinity.[198] Williams could appreciate some of Nietzsche's styles, some of his tones of voice (like the dry aphoristic tone) because they were the tones of voices which he liked more in himself — or, better, in his own writing.

---

[198] J. W. Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), Goethe sämtliche Werke, edited by Waltraud Wiethölter and Christoph Brecht., vol 8, Frankfurt am Main, Deutscher Klassiker, 1994.

3.2 Lingering: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and the Problem of Style

Cavell's tone is at times intimate in this way, and conversation then exhibits the intensity of engagement and hence the absence of a gap and of a mere objectivity between him and his subject. It is a way of making love, but it is not plain that it is philosophy.

Arthur Danto

Introduction

In the previous section, I talked about a certain stylistic method — that I called "compression"— used by Bernard Williams in order to distance himself from a specifically English tradition of philosophical writing. The aim of this section will be to investigate another stylistic method — that I shall call "lingering" — used by Stanley Cavell in order to distance himself from a dominant Anglo-American way of writing philosophy; that is, a way inspired principally by an *argumentative ideal*. Refusing to assume this ideal, Cavell discovered his own ways in philosophy, which share a common spirit — and this is a spirit that is revealed through its digressive, lingering parts.

However, what kind of ideal is inspiring this different spirit, which is not guided principally by argumentation? We might say (for now, but we will say better in due time) that it is a desire for a thorough expression and description of the human experience which forms the ideal motivating this kind of philosophical writing. In the *Postscript* to the volume of the American author Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience. Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (1962/2001), Cavell wrote: "[...] Warshows's words about movies, and more than movies, remain [...] bespeaking an intellectual conscience that is wary of saying less than it feels, or more than it knows. An admirable aspiration for philosophy".[199] The words Cavell used to describe Warshow's intellectual conscience can be applied to him as well. In fact, we shall see how Cavell tried to achieve

---

[199] R. Warshow, *The Immediate Experience. Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular19 Culture* (1962), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 299.

this "admirable aspiration", that is, "not saying less than one feels, and more than one knows" in philosophy — and how the stylistic method of lingering helped him in this aspiration.

What is the Use of Style? Aristotelian and Platonic Spirits

Let us start investigating again the idea of a stylistic method, looking at the achievements that it can accomplish. In this context, it is revealing to quote an interview with Bernard Williams,[200] where he introduces the idea of a "stylistic achievement".

The context of this passage is the interviewer posing Williams the following question: "Do you think style is useful, important, valuable to a philosopher? [In an ironic tone] *Some might argue that style, in fact, takes you further from the truth, rather than nearer to the truth*". In his response, Williams relates this concern with another concern going back to ancient philosophy, and he makes a contrast between an Aristotelian and a Platonic spirit: the supporters of Aristotle are those who "support hard, definite arguments" and who are not "enormous in literary style"; on the contrary, the supporters of Plato are those who are thought to be "the supreme stylist[s] of the history of philosophy".[201]

However, Williams adds, the style used by the Platonists is usually considered by the Aristotelians as a "total seduction" — as something mystifying, that ought not to be admired and used as a means in philosophy, but that rather has to be avoided. In fact, as an Aristotelian spirit might argue, the world just isn't what the stylist would make us believe that it is; or, as the interviewer says (taking the Aristotelians' side in order to stimulate the discussion): "The world sometimes obstinately persists in not being bent to what a stylist might wish it to be". By contrast, Williams himself sympathizes with the Platonic spirit and responds to this latter observation underlying a risk embedded in what he calls "an Aristotelian world-view". Let us read this passage in its entirety:

---

[200] '*Night Waves* Interview with Bernard Williams', (London: BBC Radio 3, September 30, 2002), transcript by Alexander Bonham. I am relying on this transcript because the text is found only in audio format and has never been published. I thank Alexander Bonham for the kind permission.

[201] '*Night Waves* Interview with Bernard Williams', *cit.*, p. 2.

Williams: "Yes, I'd absolutely deny that, I'd absolutely deny that [that the stylist bends the world to its wishes]. It depends what style is used for. What bends the world to its own purposes much more in philosophy is a set of assumptions about what the fundamental categories or modes of explanation or the shape of the world are, and Aristotelians can be as much — *in my view, more* [emphasis added] — totally immersed in a certain kind of world view, which shapes things to the way they have of answering the questions than — in this very broad sense — Platonists. Now, style, on the contrary — and this I believe to be true about Plato himself, actually, and of other very great philosophers — can itself be used to register ambiguity: to undermine this assumption that there's just one way of talking about things, just one set of categories. It can be a stylistic achievement to as it were leave the reader wondering whether that's the only way of looking at things."[202]

Williams strongly believes that an Aristotelian world-view can be much more limiting than a Platonic world-view. And, according to him, Platonic spirited philosophers sometimes use style in order to leave the reader (the Aristotelian herself?) wondering whether how she thinks is the only way of thinking, of looking at things. In this sense, Platonic spirited-philosophers use style in order to "register ambiguity" (the ambiguity of philosophical problems, but also the ambiguity of philosophical writing). Williams's own way to "register ambiguity" in philosophy was to expand the range of speech-acts used by the philosopher — in fact, he gave as much importance to asserting and arguing as he gave to *inviting*, *suggesting* and *interrogating*; and, in order to do that, he used a stylistic method to which I referred to as "compression" (a term Williams actually used to describe his own style). Williams's own appreciation of problems of style was directed toward a possible danger in assuming an Aristotelian world-view: the danger of becoming "totally immersed in a [this] kind of worldview, which shapes things to the way [....] of answering the questions", and which elevates its own style (let us say, provocatively, the stylistic method of "hard, definite arguments") as the only possible way of looking at things.

---

[202] '*Night Waves* Interview with Bernard Williams', *cit.*, p. 3.

Acknowledging (or Refusing to Acknowledge) Stanley Cavell

What about Stanley Cavell? What was the stylistic method of "lingering" directed to? Let us bracket these questions for now and let us start with giving some (late and) basic information about him. Stanley Cavell was the Walter Cabot Professor for Aesthetics and General Theory of Value at Harvard. He graduated with a B.A. in Music in Berkeley, then enrolled at the Juilliard Composition School — where he dropped out after some time because he realized that he did not want to pursue a life as a music composer. He started graduate study in philosophy at UCLA and then transferred to Harvard — where he had the luck, in 1955, to attend the lectures by Austin that would later be collected in *How to Do Things With Words*. Cavell was deeply influenced by both Austin and Wittgenstein and he saw himself as continuing their philosophical projects. After these encounters (personal with Austin, and literary with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*), Cavell would start writing a great deal, and his first collection of essays was published in 1969 with the title *Must We Mean What We Say?* Ten years later he would manage to give birth to a revised and enlarged version of his doctoral Dissertation, submitted to Harvard in 1961/1962 with the title *Claim To Rationality: Knowledge and the Basis of Morality*, and republished in 1979 as *The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*.

The publication of this book posed some interesting problems regarding the acknowledgment (or refusal of acknowledgment) of Cavell's philosophical writing by the Anglo-American context. Let us look closely then at how his style was received by this context, a context that (as I already mentioned) Cavell felt himself in contrast with. When *The Claim of Reason* was published, there was a contrast between the reviewers. The philosophers — who astonishingly converged on a common metaphor — lamented the mass of *wood* that obscured what Cavell had to say; while the literary critics appreciated what Cavell had to say, and how he wrote it down — they did not complain about the mass of *wood*.

However, how could he have responded to the critical remarks of his philosophical opponents? Let us resume briefly what they complained about this book: Anthony Kenny claimed that "the book

would have been much better if pruned of the dead wood and over-exuberant foliage";[203] while Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that, although Cavell wrote [in the *Foreword* of *The Claim of Reason*] that "Wittgensteinian writing is less prone to lend itself to professionalisation", it is "all too likely that [Cavell's own writing] will produce the opposite impression"; and he continued, addressing the problem of style (and, surprisingly, using the metaphor of the wood like Kenny): "This [failure] is partly a matter of unfortunate lapses of style. The result of what may be attempt to pin down every last detail of the argument is that all to often one cannot see the wood for the twigs";[204] finally, Jonathan Lear could not have been more explicit when, ending his review on the *The New York Times Book Review*, wrote:

> The main problem with this book is one of style. Wittgenstein's own style is so overpowering that every interpreter risks a fate that Wittgenstein managed to avoid: writing prose so stylized that it can only be appreciated by the writer himself or a few intimates. Mr. Cavell is deeply concerned with finding a philosophical voice. Unfortunately, this concern undermines him, for while much of the book is charming, there is much that is overwritten and self-conscious. Yet perhaps stylistic difficulty is the inevitable cost of having taken on the remarkable task of welcoming the poets back into the republic and re-establishing a dialogue between philosophy and literature.[205]

We may anticipate what *lingering* might mean, lingering ourselves on the words these philosophers used, and imagining the implications those characterizations might have. Are all three philosophers agreeing that *The Claim of Reason* would have been much better if only it were *shorter*? Or maybe are they agreeing that *The Claim of Reason* would have been much better if it were *faster*? These reviewers could have in mind both qualities: *The Claim of Reason* would have been much better, if only his author would have been much *shorter*, and *faster*, and to the point. Furthermore, Kenny's

---

[203] A. Kenny, "Clouds of Not Knowing", Review of *The Claim of Reason* by Stanley Cavell, *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 (April, 1980).

[204] A. MacIntyre, "Alasdair MacIntyre on the Claims of Philosophy", *London Review of Books*, June 5–18, 1980.

[205] J. Lear, "Useful Skepticism", Review of *The Claim of Reason* by Stanley Cavell, *The New York Times Book Review*, (December 2, 1979).

review makes one think of a certain laziness of Cavell, who had not bothered to cut "the dead woods and over exuberant foliage" — like a bad gardener, postponing his job because he does not bother to finish his rather tedious task. While MacIntyre's comments suggest that it is not really a matter of *laziness*, but of something even opposite: an *excess of zeal*, an attempt to pin down every single detail of Wittgenstein's text — like a geographer who wanted to produce a one to one map of the world, a magnificent but useless task. One would feel lost with this very map, incapable of using it to orient herself, because it would have an opposite effect to the one desired; and professionalization would come back from the window of endless glosses to Wittgenstein. Finally, Jonathan Lear makes a contrast that is thematic also in Cavell's work: the contrast between *style* and *stylization*. But do they mean the same thing in using the same words?

Now we can begin to see how all the remarks of these authors, taken to be self-evident for them and for some of their readers, may assume rather different meanings when we try to understand what they could have meant. And we can begin to see the difference in *nuances* in their characterizations of Cavell's style, all of which seem to talk about the same thing — but, if we take a closer look at them, they begin to appear even very distant from each other: the very words and (different) expressions they used, if examined, turn out to mean different things (meaning "laziness" is meaning something opposite to "an excess of zeal"). Contrasted with Kenny and MacIntyre, Lear's comment adds three more characterizations of Cavell's prose style: the good news is that this style bears the testimony of the search for a philosophical voice; the bad news is that this very search is undermined by the fact that Cavell's prose style is over-written and self-conscious. Again, if we look closer at these qualifications (that seem to be just the same thing as Kenny's and MacIntyre's) we see how different they are in fact. These two stylistic difficulties (over-writing and self-consciousness) are in fact linked by Lear to the remarkable task of welcoming back the poets in the republic, and to the remarriage of philosophy and literature (something that is not remarked by Kenny and MacIntyre).

What is implied here? It seems to be implied that over-writing and self-consciousness *per se* are not a problem in poetry and literature; they could not be condemned by themselves; they are condemned

if they do not let the author achieve what she wanted to achieve with her work. As Umberto Eco remarked in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994), it would be pointless to accuse Proust of spending thirty pages describing the protagonist of the *Recherche* just moving in bed, and not being able to fall asleep.[206] We could accuse Proust of endless length if we think that his attempt to show the complexity of the world is not remunerative to an understanding of the complexity itself (because the prose is too complicated to be in service of complexity). This is something that worried Milan Kundera, who in *The Art of the Novel* talked about the risk of certain novelists to be unable to deal with complexity, ending up choosing *endless length* and achieve *less with more* with their own writing.[207] One has to be able to remember the beginning of a book, writes Kundera, echoing the worry of Kenny when he cited the opening of *The Claim of Reason* as an example of the convoluted, *less-with-more* directed style of the whole book.

What I want to say — or rather, what I want to show — is this: the accusations of over-writing and self-indulgence, in the absence of further specifications, are *empty*. Or rather, they are revealing of (what Williams has called) an Aristotelian spirit, a spirit that prefers (and would like to reduce) philosophy to the presentation of defined arguments, eradicating everything that seems (at least at first reading) only *ornamental*. In Kenny's case, his judgment suggests a critique of materials in excess, considered as merely ornamental, as unnecessary branches — in the same way as some of our body organs which, being useless, can also be removed (the so-called vestigial organs). In the Preface of *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (1989), however, Cavell writes that some infections to the vestigial organs can become life-threatening to the human body (for example, an infection to the appendix).[208] And — to continue with this metaphor — when some vestigial organ is inflamed, this can be due either to a deficiency or to an excess. Kenny sees the excess in the *dead branches* (and, consequently, the deficiency in the lack of self-discipline; let us remind the image of the bad gardener); while Cavell sees the excess in philosophers who, preferring the desert to the woods,

---

[206] *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, *cit.*, p. 49.

[207] M. Kundera, "Dialogue on the Art of Composition" in *The Art of the Novel*, New York, Grove Press, 1988.

[208] S. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (1989), Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 6.

make the desert grow in their own philosophical writing (in this case, the problem is a deficiency of vitality); and this latter seems a kind of philosophical writing that aspires to *an ideal of purity* (an ideal of philosophy as being just one thing: in that picture, asserting and arguing).

Let us take the wood metaphor used by both Kenny and MacIntyre even more seriously, and let us linger on it. Kenny seems to imply that, in *The Claim of Reason*, there are many branches in excess that are dead, and that just need to be cut; by contrast, we can wonder if the wood is in fact alive, and if the branches in excess are the mark of a *disordered forest* (which can be acknowledged and welcomed, let us say by those who do not see in each forest a potential well-pruned garden). MacIntyre, on the other hand, writes that, by reading Cavell, we cannot see the wood because of twigs — suggesting that the too many branches of the text do not allow us to see "how things really are", *the hard core*, the truth; in contrast to that, we can wonder if this assumption is in fact an assumption of an Aristotelian spirit, a spirit which believers that style, in philosophy, "takes us further from the truth, rather than nearer".

Anyway, we have already mentioned a further image of the wood, or rather, of the woods, without however dwelling on it. Umberto Eco's book is indeed called *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. In contrast to philosophy, in literature there is no desire for cleanliness, no nuisance for the bushes — apart from when certain literary movements express it (for instance, and to put it very crudely, realists against surrealists). All these different movements, however, are aware of them being *currents*, *waves*, and not taking the place of the *sea* — that, in this image, is the entirety of literature. One of the six walks proposed by Eco in his book is dedicated to what he calls the art of "lingering" (in the chapter called "Lingering in the Woods"). Eco begins his lecture by asking himself how we are to assess Proust's endless lengths in the *Recherche*, and among the answers he gives there is the linking of Proust's prose to the art of the so-called *delectatio morosa* (from Latin, something like "the pleasure to linger"). By that Eco means the art of lingering when something important is going to take place. This was originally a term of *the sexual casuistry*; the pleasures of lingering are in fact part of enjoying the full sexual experience — an experience where the preliminaries have so much importance as the act itself. These pleasures of the sexual sphere are related by Eco to the pleasures

(or *tortures*, it depends on the reader) which some kinds of authors provide when they slow down their pace as soon as they feel that they are in presence of something that requires their full attention, and detail, and — most of all — *time*. In these occasions, the author is taking the right time, and open enough space, when she feels that something of importance (at least to her) is going to take place. My idea is that we are going to illuminate Cavell's aspiration in philosophy if we think of his writing as wanting to linger when something important (at least to him) becomes part of the investigation.

Against this aspiration, I imagine a possible objection from the Aristotelians: "But isn't the business of literature to achieve the right expression for the object under examination?". In fact, an Aristotelian-spirited philosopher might have no problem whatsoever with Proust's enterprise and with the stylistic methods he employed in order to achieve his goals. But why should philosophy bother to linger too? What justifies the philosopher's lingering? To these questions we might answer: there is a kind of philosophical writing that gives importance to its literary *expression*. It is the type of philosophy that needs to be *read*: in order to understand what a philosopher is up to we cannot jump to the conclusions, to the results, but we have to go through the path that her text proposes us. And this path can be more or less tortuous, depending on the difficulty and the importance of what the author is trying to say, and mean, with her words. But again an Aristotelian might object: "If the aim of the philosopher is truth, why bother with expression?". And to this further objection an answer might be: the philosopher who wants to embody "an intellectual conscience that is wary of saying less than one feels and more than one knows" is actually aiming at both *truth* and *expression*: she searches for a kind of precision that is the precision the human experience requires. For instance, when we have to talk about objects of our experience such as love, or friendship (or, as Robert Warhow did, *movies*) we have to find the right words in order to express what we really want to; and finding the right words is not *merely* the business of expression — meaning an expression separated from the truth; in fact, the things we are trying to express aim at the truth, they are trying to be *truthful expressions*.

However, when the philosopher starts from her own experience (or imagination) it can happen what Augustine admitted happened to him with the idea of time: "If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it, I do not know.". — In this spirit, philosophical writing takes the form of, as Wittgenstein claimed: "I don't know my way about".[209]

A Reading of the Excursus

It is time to close read a piece of Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, in order to make sense of this idea of lingering, and also *to look and see* if we recognize something like that in his text. I have chosen some pages of Chapter VII of *The Claim of Reason*, which is titled *Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language*. Like most of the book (and especially Part One and Part Four, that bear the titles of *Wittgenstein* and *Tragedy* respectively) these pages are inspired by Wittgensteinian themes and procedures. However, they do not limit themselves neither just to gloss over Wittgenstein (as MacIntyre's claimed) nor to just to stylize, to imitate his procedures (as Lear claimed). Cavell takes up Wittgenstein's critique to the so-called Augustianian picture of language, and divides it in three parts. The Excursus deals most specifically with the second and the third parts, which are approached in the subparagraphs *Learning a word* and *Projecting a word*. In *Learning a word*, Cavell chooses to write the following example (which I have to reproduce with some length, enough length to give the impression of *endless length* those philosophy reviewers had. Even though I will break Cavell's tale with my own comments):

> Take this example: Suppose my daughter now knows two dozen words. (Books on child development must say things like: At age 15 months the average child will have a vocabulary of so many words.) One of the words she knows, as her Baby Book will testify, is "kitty". What does it mean to say she "knows the word"? What does it mean to say she "learned it"? Take the day on which, after I said "Kitty" and pointed to a kitty, she repeated the word and pointed to the kitty. What does "repeating the word" mean here? and what did she point to? All I know is (and does she know more?) that she made the sound I made and pointed to what I pointed at. Or rather, I

[209] *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., §123.

know less (or more) than that. For what is "her making the sound I made"? She produced a sound (imitated me?) which I accepted, responded to (with smiles, hugs, words of encouragement, etc.) as what I had said. The next time a cat came by, on the prowl or in a picture book, she did it again. A new entry for the Baby Book under "Vocabulary".[210]

Reading this passage, and imagining reading it in an oral presentation, can already seem quite *long*. However, this first paragraph is already embodying some of the stylistic marks of Cavell's prose: the use of parenthetical remarks, the "storm" of questions, the details, the interrogative and imaginative tone. In the first parenthetical remark there is the standard, *average* knowledge: "Books on child development must say that [...] at 15 months the average child will have a vocabulary of...". This information is clearly not enough, but is inserted as a counterpoint to the *intimate* (opposed to the *average*) knowledge which Cavell aims to. In fact, he concentrates on his daughter's use of the word "Kitty". Does he know how she uses it? Has she already learned the word? Here Cavell limits himself to saying what he can actually say, to saying no more (and no less) than what is happening (in reality or in his imagination): he is recounting a story, building the scenery for letting our thoughts grow about this particular example; he even writes about a Baby Book — which seems to be a kind of diary kept by parents to keep track of their children's progress. Let us continue with the example:

Now take the day, some weeks later, when she smiled at a fur piece, stroked it, and said "kitty". My first reaction was surprise, and, I suppose, disappointment: she doesn't really know what "kitty" means. But my second reaction was happier: she means by "kitty" what I mean by "fur". Or was it what I mean by "soft", or perhaps "nice to stroke"? Or perhaps she didn't mean at all what in my syntax would be recorded as "That is an X". After all, when she sees real kittens she not only utters her allophonic version of "kitty", she usually squeals the word over and over, squats down near it, stretches out her arm towards it and opens and closes her fingers (an allomorphic version of "petting the kitten"?), purses her lips, and squints with pleasure. All she did with the fur piece was, smiling, to say "kitty" once and stroke it. Perhaps the syntax of that performance should be transcribed as "This is like a kitty", or "Look at the funny kitty", or

[210] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, pp. 171–172.

"Aren't soft things nice?", or "See, I remember how pleased you are when I say 'kitty'", or "I like to be petted". Can we decide this? Is it a choice between these definite alternatives? In each case her word was produced about a soft, warm, furry object of a certain size, shape, and weight. What did she learn in order to do that? *What did she learn from having done it?* If she had never made such leaps she would never have walked into speech.[211]

Again, the tone of the text continues to remain interrogative, and hesitating. The "I" of the text is not sure how the child means what she says: he thought he knew it, but the child herself showed him how he was wrong — or, rather, left him unsure if she did in fact mean what she said. She may have, but she may also have not. It is worth noticing how the description of the child uttering "kitty" encompassed not only the linguistic expressions, but also the bodily movements accompanying them. Why is it important to list all these features of the child's behavior? Are they necessary? (Are we in presence of over-writing? Are we touching *dead branches*?) Cavell lingers over all these details, expressing what he feels necessary to a thorough understanding of the particular situation. "After all" — as Cavell writes before introducing this description — "after all" she does all these things while saying "kitty" and looking closely at every single gesture of the child can help him understand what she means — if she means "kitty", or "fur", or "soft things are nice" or "nice to stroke" (in fact, every single one of these expression could be accompanied by different bodily movements, let us say "nice to stroke" and "soft things are nice" with different "squints of pleasure"). Finally, Cavell is ready to introduce the pronoun "we": he has shown us their relationship, how far they can walk together, what are the paths they can and cannot share. And right now, Cavell is also ready to share a more extended path with his reader (after the previous walks, after lingering enough in the woods of his words):

But although I didn't tell her, and she didn't learn, either what the word "kitty" means or what a kitty is, if she keeps leaping and I keep looking and smiling, she will learn both. I have wanted to say: Kittens — what we call "kittens" —do not exist in her world yet, she has not acquired the forms of life which contain them. They do not exist in something like the way cities and mayors will not exist in her world

---

[211] *The Claim of Reason, cit.*, p. 172.

until long after pumpkins and kittens do; or like the way God or love or responsibility or beauty do not exist in our world; we have not mastered, or we have forgotten, or we have distorted, or learned through fragmented models, the forms of life which could make utterances like "God exists" or "God is dead" or "I love you" or "I cannot do otherwise" or "Beauty is but the beginning of terror" bear all the weight they could carry, express all they could take from us. We do not know the meaning of the words. We look away and leap around.

[...]

What I am afraid of is that we take too much for granted about what the learning and the sharing of language implies.[212]

This passage shows how Cavell's lingering is not just between he and himself or between he and his imaginary interlocutors — the lingering was directed towards the reader all the time. We have to read his text, we have to leap with his words, in order to be ready to receive observations like: "We do not know the meaning of the words. We look away and leap around". Placing these observations at the beginning of the text, rather than at the end of it, would have rendered the overall tone *moralistic*, as if preaching from the outside, and not judging from the inside. The importance of investigating the meanings of what we say and what we do not say is not *simply asserted* by Cavell, as if it were a discovery that he made and that he shares with us. This importance is *reenacted* in the course of the unfolding of the example: we are ready to acknowledge the perceptivity of Cavell's investigation because we experience the situation in all its details. The example sounds real.

I read this entire passage — and the rest of the Excursus, which we have no time to comment right now — as embodying Cavell's more general spirit towards philosophy. He is afraid that we take too many things for granted when we do philosophy. In fact, if we focus solely on the importance of the building of "hard, definite arguments" we can forget all the other things which we have to do while doing philosophy: for instance, we have to learn *to read* a text, to interpret it, to imagine what an author might mean and, most of all, to see how it is difficult to accomplish these tasks. This "passive" moment of reading and interpreting requires patience, time and imagination: according

---

[212] *The Claim of Reason, cit.*, pp. 172–173.

to Cavell, there is not a definite, *given* set of philosophical problems; we have to start from philosophical texts and interpret the motivations underlying them. Sometimes we have to ask ourselves if the motivations are purely *academic*, if they are directed to an oversimplification of our lived experience. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell gives some examples of purely academic matters, and at a certain point he even proposes a more general label to them, which may sound provocative (or even offensive): "Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human". Cavell writes:

> [...] To trace the intellectual history of philosophy's concentration on the meaning of particular words and sentences, in isolation from a systematic attention to their concrete uses would be a worthwhile undertaking. It is a concentration one of whose consequences is [...] the idea of perfect understanding as being achievable only through the construction of a perfect language. A fitting title for this history would be: Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human.[213]

What is the idea of "a perfect understanding as being achievable by the construction of a perfect language"? Is it perhaps a motive underlying the abstractions of the philosopher's tools? Underlying her anxiety to build more and more perfected arguments in support of specific thesis or theories? Let us recall that, in relation to the learning of the child's language, Cavell wrote: "I am afraid we take too many things for granted about what the learning and sharing of languages implies". The same happens in the learning and sharing of philosophy. What are the many facts that we take for granted here? They could be *the facts of human life* that we take for granted when we advance schematic pictures, or theories of it; or when we argue for or against a thesis, or when we advance an argument. However, as Cavell reminds us, before arguing for or against a philosophical thesis, we have to learn to read, *to linger on* a philosophical text. And we may be too quick in doing that.

Wittgenstein famously wrote that he wanted "to slow the reader down with his own writing";[214] and he wrote his observations in short paragraphs; and this technique (combined with other Wittgensteinian features: like returning incessantly on a theme, adopting a meditative mood...) gives us the impression of "slowness" and of "repetition". In Cavell we also have these impressions,

---

[213] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, pp. 206–207.

[214] L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1977), edited by G. H. Von Wright, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, p. 65.

but mostly we have the impression of "length", we experience all the waves of language (with all its hesitations and doubts).

Right now I imagine the Aristotelian-spirited philosopher wrinkling her eyebrows and objecting to this competing image of philosophical writing: "Is this still philosophy? Isn't it just literature?". And to that I think that Cavell might reply something like: "But philosophical writing — because philosophy is *writing*, not just reporting results, as Wittgenstein showed him— must acknowledge that it can fail as literature fails. And one can fail to read a text, understand what an author means". However, Cavell reminds us not only this fact of philosophical reading, but he also relates this fact, that could seem merely academic, to a real fact: the capacity to read a philosophical text is linked by Cavell to the capacity to read *human textures of expression* — like the child's texture that Cavell showed us in the example of the Excursus, like the textures of the people that we encounter in our life. And how often do we argue with other people? Before doing that, we have to try to understand them, try to understand what they mean — and we can fail to do that. The stylistic method of lingering used by Cavell is directed towards this kind of understanding, which is long, tortuous, and difficult.

In the *Replies* to the volume called *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (2005), Cavell resumed his attitude in philosophy claiming that he wanted to assume "a less distancing face"[215] than the purely argumentative, Aristotelian spirited face seems to be; in contrast to this distancing face, Cavell wanted to assume a more participating, engaging face, and we might add that the stylistic method of lingering helped him to shape the lines of this kind of face: a face that is wary "to say less than it feels and more than it knows" — where "not to say less than one feels" now turns out to mean that the philosopher has to start from her own experience, her own *readings*, interests and motivations; and she has to renounce them to assume an impersonal stance: the point of view *just* of the arguments, which is, according to Stanley Cavell, a point of view that *rejects the human,* and that ends up claiming more than what a human can actually, *confidently*, know. As Bernard Williams wrote in a different context: "We do not have to think that what is principally wrong with our

---

[215] R. Goodman, edited by, *Contending With Stanley Cavell*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 163.

understanding [...] is that [it is] insufficiently rational: [it] may be, for instance, insufficiently honest".[216]

So I shall conclude this section with another bit of Cavell's text (this time from *Little Did I Know* (2010), his autobiography) where his philosophical aspirations are announced in all its defiance — the defiance of a remarriage between literature and philosophy, against their historical divorce. And I hope that, after my own lingering, we could be able to read his aspiration as the aspiration of a Platonic spirit, of a writer who makes us wonder *if there is more than just one way of looking at things* (as there is more than one way of doing philosophy):

> It is obvious enough to me that something moving me to think philosophically, more characteristically than in the case of the philosophers I have grown up with, is less an impulse to refute a text that attracts me than it is to read it differently from the way it seems to ask, but asks. This has not seemed to me to be an avoidance of the argument of a text but an alternative way of engaging it, a way of creating a future in which we both, the text and I, learn something about ourselves.[217]

---

[216] *Making Sense of Humanity*, *cit.*, p. 183.

[217] *Little Did I Know*, *cit.*, p. 191.

Interlude: Introduction to Chapters Four and Five

In the previous chapters, I showed how Williams and Cavell shared two major aims in philosophy. The first aim was to reveal the depth and richness of the moral life through the examples. The tradition to which they belonged — that of Anglo-American philosophy — brought with it criteria that were too rigid for the writing of moral philosophy. Both philosophers therefore decided to open up the possibilities of philosophical writing to more literary and imaginative paths. The examples of George and Jim allowed Williams to trace an alternative route for writing moral philosophy, in opposition to utilitarian philosophy. In terms of the emphasis on exemplification and the use of actual 'conceptual characters', Williams would remain consistent for the rest of his production. I have not referred to these other characters who populate Williams's writings,[218] because I was interested mainly in highlighting the emergence of an impulse towards the question of style. (As Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*: "I will say a general word about my *art of style*. To communicate a state, an inner tension of pathos, with signs, including the tempo of these signs – that is the meaning of every style".)[219]

As far as Cavell is concerned, however, the rewriting of Stevenson's example marks an important turning point in his production. The critique of the examples in *Ethics and Language*, in fact, goes back to Cavell's earliest production, even to the time of the writing of his doctoral thesis. The young Cavell — like 'the young Williams' — rails against a simplification and stylization of the moral life and tries to restore the sense of this experience. The critique, however, does not take place in the abstract, but is imbued with the *materiality of writing*, intended to show how much can be lost in handling an abstract, scientistic writing of the moral life. As with Williams, Cavell's attention to the composition of small narrative pieces will remain important throughout his production; indeed, it will deepen even more than Williams's; or rather, it will deepen in a more imaginative direction still: if Williams tends to take examples directly from literature, or examines

---

[218] Such as for example Elina Makropulos, Anna Karenina and Gauguin, Agamemnon and Oedipus, Rameau's Nephew (which I will discuss in Section 4.2). See S. Mulhall, "The Mortality of the Soul: Bernard Williams's Character(s)", in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, edited by Alice Crary, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2007, 355–378.

[219] *Ecce Homo, cit.*, p. 104.

cases that are feigned stylizations (which in turn refer to complex problems of our moral life), for Cavell it will become central to produce genuine short stories, small parables, allegories, which will populate the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason*.

Another aim that Williams and Cavell shared is that of forging a personal, typical and recognizable style of writing. It is not enough to criticize the shortcomings of others, but one must be able to respond with one's own method. The foundations of this method could already be glimpsed, *in nuce*, in the criticism of the examples of Smart and Stevenson. In speaking of *stylistic method*, however, I understood the construction of a path (the word 'method' derives in fact from the Ancient Greek *meta*, 'through' + *hodos*, 'way') typically *theirs*. Even in this path, however, a similarity can be glimpsed: the stylistic methods employed by Williams and Cavell both aim to show how philosophy can be written in many ways; how a plurality of styles should be encouraged; how those who believe that philosophy is 'one thing' carry with them a too short-sighted and narrow perspective. 'There are many ways to get it right in philosophy' Bernard Williams will not be weary of repeating.[220]

However, these modes, while sharing a common intent, turned out to be very different — even opposite — in their realization: Williams preferred to cultivate concise, pungent, allusive writing; while Cavell preferred to cultivate digressive, reflective, and intimate writing. This diversity is immediately apparent to any reader of the two philosophers (and could be shown, for example, by a quantitative study of the length of their sentences). The third chapter is still too focused on showing the similarity of intentions to really be able to care about the significance of this divergence of realization between stylistic methods. Indeed, one might ask: doesn't this radical opposition suggest a greater distance between Williams and Cavell than that shown in the previous chapters? It is time to investigate this fact, and see where it takes us. This allows us to add one more piece to the investigation of style: what are, so to speak, the conditions of possibility of different styles in philosophy? One answer is: being different *types* of philosophers.

What kind of philosophers did Williams and Cavell want to be? So far I have indeed shown a similarity of purpose, but the time has come to ask the question seriously: "Did they not perhaps cultivate different philosophical aims? Despite the initial consonant impulses, and the pluralistic

---

[220] See *infra* p. 22 and, in particular, note 17.

openness cultivated throughout their lives?". Let us therefore analyze the ultimate aims of the two philosophers, starting with the analysis of their later works.

With the publication of *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises* (1994), Stanley Cavell has been exploring more closely the link between philosophy and autobiography. The first essay of the book, entitled "Philosophy and the Arrogation of Voice", provides us with the basic outlines of Cavell's understanding of the relationship between philosophy and autobiography.[221]

According to Cavell, philosophers can only claim the right to speak for others when they reveal their starting position. This can also mean that one can authentically speak for others — potentially for everyone — by speaking deeply about oneself. This is, in short, the Cavellian *credo*; a *credo* that Cavell in turn inherits from Emerson's conception of genius: "To believe your own thoughts, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men — that is genius"; "Speak of your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense".[222]

But one needs a technique, a method, to discover this connection. It is not enough just to talk about yourself — you may fail in this attempt. A particularly important warning in this regard is found in the Introduction to Bernard Williams's *Shame and Necessity* (1993). Williams asks: "Why not take examples from life? It is a perfectly good question, and it has a short answer: what philosophers will lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature will not be life, but bad literature".[223] How can this impasse be avoided? How can good literature about one's own life be produced? There is a need to handle the literary medium with care. Is it not true, then, that it is enough to give voice to one's inner self to reach others? Yes and no. In fact, it is not so easy to give voice to one's inner self. The inner self is not something that can be thrown in the readers' faces as if they were automatically familiar with it. There is a need not only to give voice to the intimate — but *to find one's voice* to talk about intimate matters.

How does one find one's voice? Does everyone have their own method? Williams, when talking about *discovering a style*, mentioned that discovering a style involves "[discovering] what you are

---

[221] S. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises* (1994), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, pp. 1–51.

[222] *Self-reliance, cit.*, p. 147.

[223] B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity,* Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993, p. 13.

really trying to do".[224] In this sense, learning to write in general — and in particular to write about oneself — is an activity that confronts the author with the limits of his or her own enterprise. What counts as success in such an endeavor?

Let us examine Cavell's most substantial attempt to talk about himself in order to reach others (potentially *everyone*, but potentially also *no one*):

> How do I know but that what I say will better, more helpfully, be received by a young Cuban poet teaching Spanish in a community center in Buckhead, or a middle-aged Vietnamese high school teacher, with a taste for philosophy, keeping the books for her older brother's restaurant in Allston, than by a native, distracted Harvard sophomore from a broken Jewish home in Fresno for whom, for example, black-and-white films are still, as a group, old movies. Do I need to know?[225]

Cavell's imagination is not totally unrealistic. In this writing exercise, Cavell tries to imagine a possible audience for this autobiography he has just begun to write. The people he imagines are: a young Cuban poet, who has immigrated to the United States, and lives in Buckhead, a commercial district of Atlanta; a woman, again an immigrant, and of Vietnamese descent, who is passionate about philosophy, and who keeps books in her brother's restaurant in Allston, a neighborhood in the city of Boston; and finally a young aspiring philosophy student, at Harvard, from a Jewish background, and with a certain idea of cinema and, in particular, a certain inexperience, or lack of exposure, to a certain genre of film (the black and white films that did not mark his childhood and adolescence, but did mark Cavell's growth).

"Do I need to know?", Cavell asks himself at the end of this excerpt. That "I" and "know" reflect two of the four words in the title of Cavell's autobiography, *Little Did I Know*, which, as any English speaker will take for granted (but which may come as a surprise to those who are learning it as a foreigner, or have learned it in the past as a non-native speaker) is an idiomatic expression used to say: "Who would have ever said that" or even "Who could have ever imagined that".

"Who would have imagined that" the words of this text would resonate in the experience of a reader so different from Cavell himself? Like that of a young Italian PhD student, passionate about TV shows, an aspiring writer and exposed to a precarious working future (and an immediate life that

---

[224] See *infra* p. 80.

[225] *Little Did I Know*, *cit.*, p. 7.

seems to be made up of regular moves — in Italy or abroad). What an author was really trying to do will be decided in part (a big part, maybe the whole part) by *the audience*.

Did Cavell need to know? The most sensible answer seems to me to be no. He didn't need to know; but he did need to delve into the most ordinary and seemingly trivial rivulets of his own life in order to get the text to as many people as possible.

For example: let us imagine that this Italian PhD student — let us call him Paolo — was investigating the relationship between Cavell's and Williams's philosophy. How useful will he find Cavell's own recollections of his meeting and friendship with Williams? It all depends on how he will be able to read them, on how these words — this text — will fit in with this researcher's own story.

I will therefore begin, for my own purposes, by reporting in full Cavell's recollections of his first meeting with Williams. I will report the whole context, namely the note from the 17th of August, 2003:

> August 17, 2003
>
> I had brought a new red mesh bag of several dozen marbles with me to Mary's house, and I was playing with them in the open smoothed dirt (or clay?) space at the bottom of the back stairs when a tall thin boy in overalls from one of the row of small houses extending back from the other side of the space walked over, along with two boys about my age. The tall boy said: "Want to play for keeps?" I must have nodded. He went back to his house and returned with a large musty glass jar almost filled with marbles, almost none, at a glance, new. He set down the jar, picked up a twig, and with it drew in four or five sweeping strokes a large, well-formed circle on the ground. He set up five or six of his marbles an inch or so apart at the center and along a diameter of the circle: "Now you put in." I extended his line with a matching number of my new marbles. He motioned for me to go first. I was not going to show my innocence by asking what the rules were, so, kneeling outside the edge of the circle, I took a large marble from my bag as my shooter and bending forward flicked it with my thumb as hard as I could at the surprisingly great distance of the centered line of marbles at risk. My shooter rolled toward the line and made a notable break in it, but neither my shooter nor the marble or marbles I hit managed to reach and cross the perimeter of the circle. "My turn," the boy said. He picked up my shooter and handed it to me. He then knelt down on one knee at the edge of the circle, the opposite leg stretched out straight to the side, lowered his head, and instantly, without his seeming to move, his shooter flung itself, without touching the ground between, upon one of my new marbles. Both my marble and his shooter flew out of the circle. I could not with a windup have thrown the marble with the velocity his mere thumb achieved.

He walked over to pick up both of the marbles involved, mine he tossed into his jar of marbles, his shooter he lined up again outside the place where roughly it had exited the circle. He then repeated this routine, without missing, until the line of marbles he and I had staked were all in his jar. He then without a word picked up the jar and walked back to his house. The two younger boys with him had started to giggle, and they ran off after him.

I figure the nest of lessons to be derived from this display were cheap at the price of a half-dozen marbles, indeed of a medium-sized bag of new marbles, since I threw the rest away. I understand these lessons not particularly to warn about confidence games, but rather on the contrary to suggest the range and distribution and guises and histories of genuine virtuosity.

The day I met the virtuosic Bernard Williams, visiting from Oxford at the Princeton University philosophy department for the spring semester of 1963, both of us without our families (it was the second half of my year at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies; Bernard's then wife and their daughter were to join him in six weeks), we arranged to have dinner together that night, and we talked until dawn. He had read both of the papers I had published, in the second of which, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," I refer to a piece of his, one of his earliest, that had appeared in the cultural journal *Encounter*. Bernard seemed pleased and surprised by this and asked about it. I mentioned that Austin, whom I had known at Harvard in 1955 and again at Berkeley in 1958, had singled him out for praise among the young Oxford philosophers. This admiration was not reciprocated, Bernard finding Austin cold and insufferably dogmatic, in contrast, he added, to the tone of my first essay, "Must We Mean What We Say?" in effect an homage to, anyway an extended and grateful study of, Austin's work. Bernard did not disguise a quizzical air in reporting that Austin had annoyingly pushed to have graduate students and the younger dons at Oxford read that early essay of mine—I was unsure whether the report was quizzical because my piece was neither cold nor dogmatic or because graduate students bristled at being asked to read the work of another graduate student (an American student present in Austin's seminar then will, soon after I moved to Harvard to teach, report that reaction to me), or because Austin was pushing an homage to his own work.

I said to Bernard that the two friends I talked philosophy most with at Berkeley, each arriving there from Harvard within a year of my own return, were also not unequivocally pleased with my labors over Austin. Thompson Clarke, who had spent some time at Oxford, expressed distrust at Austin's philosophical manner (his air of, say, dismissive humor in replying to the unconvinced), although Clarke was more indebted to Austin than he admitted to himself, as was, in my view, Bernard; and Thomas Kuhn, for reasons not clear to me, was suspicious of what he felt was my undue fascination with the details of Austin's work.

I was moved to add to Bernard that both Clarke and Kuhn were doing work that would change things in philosophy. He had heard of each of them, not just from the fact that I express my indebtedness to each

of them in my early papers, and he replied: "I get the alarming sense that American academic life is dotted with land mines." I understood this to mean that from the vantage of a life spent at Oxford you readily imagine that it is in effect your birthright to know everyone whose work might impinge upon your own. Since no such idea is apt to occur to anyone working in North America, I came to rely on my judgment of talent as firmly as on that of accomplishment. My sense of Kuhn and Clarke early was that their talents in relation to their projects were such that land mines were irrelevant to them. Their efforts in the world may not succeed, for the endless reasons that efforts may not succeed in the world (and I already felt that there are more such reasons in America than elsewhere, more promises more visibly thwarted here), but they will not be outstripped, or if they will be, only by means of their own contributions.

In our last conversation before the Williamses were to return to England I allowed myself to say to Bernard that I thought his writing did not do justice to his thoughts and interests as I was coming to know them. I may actually have said that I thought he was better than he wrote. A risky plunge, but I had invested in our friendship and evidently needed to test it. His response was to reply, as it were standing apart for a moment from his brilliance and charm, that he recognized this and did not accept it as final. Something I did not risk saying to him, then or ever, was that I also thought one must perpetually write better than one is. So although I felt he tolerated a considerable amount of nonsense from me, I did not learn whether he would have swallowed that one quite whole.[226]

This excerpt embodies very well the qualities of Cavell's prose: reminiscent, psychoanalytic, detailed. The first part of the passage shows us a Cavell in his childhood/adolescence, playing marbles. The encounter with the tall boy is an omen of the encounter with Bernard Williams: both are masters of the virtuoso, quick in their moves, perfect in their execution. Anyone who has personally met Williams has testified to these skills, the skills of an agile, young, brilliant mind.

The way of composing this piece is also significant of the method Cavell followed to write his autobiography. The text is made up of short daily notes, dated, and written following the news of a difficult heart operation. The format he chose allows him to follow a non-strictly linear itinerary. Although the first parts of the book focus on his childhood/adolescence, this pattern does not prevent him from inserting excerpts of memories from later periods of his life.

The moment is everything. His recollection of the fortuitous, casual, losing moment reminds him of the mastery of another skilled player: the philosopher Williams, skilled at donning the guise of the analytical philosopher, and playing the argumentation game to perfection. Yet the contrast

---

[226] *Little Did I Know*, *cit.*, pp. 148–150.

between these two episodes, if carefully analyzed, can be surprising. Let us therefore dwell calmly on the first episode.

In the back of his aunt's house, Stanley (let us use his proper name, as we are talking about a child) is approached by a group of boys, one of whom is unequivocally shown to be not only older and taller than them, but also the most charismatic. Moreover, he is a child of few but significant words: "Want to play for keeps?" he asks Stanley, who accepts the challenge. The boy shows himself to be an expert at tracing the field of play, drawing it on the ground with skill and leaving the first shot to Stanley, who makes his throw with some success, but without managing to catch his opponent's marble. At this point the boy, with a laconic "My turn", prepares for his shot. The preparation for the execution, as well as the execution itself, are impeccable; the body movements do not suggest any perceptible effort, and the boy succeeds in sweeping away the ball of the admired Stanley — and then, one after the other, all the others. Moreover, (adult) Cavell recalls how the tall boy's marbles were not new, but rather old, a sign of some experience in the game. Whereas little Stanley's marbles are brand new.

This contrast may remind one of the gulf of experience, in terms of philosophical baggage, of the English tradition compared to the American one. Indeed, in his subsequent exchange with Williams, Cavell recalls his stinging assessment of the state of American philosophy: "I get the alarming sense that American academic life is dotted with land mines" — a terse remark that indicates how Cavell's projected expectations of Kuhn and Clarke might turn out to be misplaced hopes that might incur a miserable failure.

As the 17 August 2003 note itself progressed, however, Cavell grew. The 1963 Cavell, the one from Princeton (and not the Stanley from his aunt's backyard), possesses a greater self-confidence to be able to firmly believe in his own judgment: even if American academic life has all the makings to crush the careers of these two up-and-coming young philosophers — Cavell's friends — he is confident that the value of their contributions will manage to be immune to any external threat (a correct prophecy in Kuhn's case, at least from the point of view of his impending planetary success; less apt in Clarke's case, at least to date).

The mere recollection of an encounter with a child virtuoso in the game of marbles is enough for Cavell to remember how that event constituted his first lesson in humility. There are talents so great that they inspire intense respect and admiration — as well as a certain reverential awe. In the

flashforward to Princeton in 1963, however, the meeting with Williams, though shrouded in mystery, takes place in a context of friendship. And it is nice to read how the two philosophers, once they had met, talked late into the night. Another flashforward takes us directly to the moment of farewell, when Williams (joined by his family) has to return to the UK. Cavell — not without a certain risk — confides to his new friend how he has noticed, by frequenting him, that he is much more interesting, alive, brilliant in person than in his writings (without detracting from the already achieved mastery of these, the text suggests).

And Williams — "as it were standing apart for a moment from his brilliance and charm", as Cavell writes — replies that he does not consider this stage as final, thus accepting his friend's observation, acknowledging it, but showing how it may be disproved by the future. Cavell then keeps a further remark to himself, but gives it to the readers of his autobiography: according to him, *philosophers must constantly strive to write better than they are*. Why, we might ask, does Cavell keep this remark to himself? Most likely because he knows it might not resonate with his new friend's chords. It is in fact a precept, a warning that the mature Cavell has reached for himself: for him, writing must always, constantly, perpetually aspire to a higher stage of perfection than that of life. On this point even Williams (if we recall his observation in *Shame and Necessity* about literature and life) might have agreed. But Cavell evidently sensed how the image of the philosopher that emerges from this warning might clash with the image of the philosopher that his friend had communicated to him as his own during that stay.

We can therefore ask: what image of the philosopher might Williams have communicated to Cavell during their brief friendly exchange in 1963?

Of course, there is no point in indulging in vacuous and unfounded speculation. Let us therefore try to rely on the statements in Cavell's text. In the note of 17 August 2003, the image of the philosopher represented by Austin is brought up. Cavell and Williams have two different images of Austin: the former sees him as a revolutionary and a true master; the latter sees him as a philosopher with a cold and dogmatic temperament. Beyond the merits of the Austin discourse, it may be interesting to dwell on the importance of certain questions of style in philosophy. For instance, Williams compares Austin's cold and dogmatic tone with Cavell's tone, favoring the latter — without specifying in what sense Cavell's tone can be understood as almost antipodal to Austin's tone, but merely stating this contrast).

The liveliness of Cavell's voice — if we assume that this is a quality of his prose — had been perceived by Williams while reading "Must We Mean What We Say?" and "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy", and now receives further confirmation thanks to their meeting in person. A liveliness shared and cultivated by Williams himself, and perhaps also for this reason appreciated by him in his interlocutors.

The two philosophers thus met, found themselves in tune, and talked late into the night, allowing themselves to be carried away by a certain pleasure of an unlimited conversation. (In *Little Did I Know* Cavell identifies precisely this pleasure as one of the criteria for friendship.)[227] Perhaps it is worth remembering, for the skeptical reader (who I am), who might think something like "There are a thousand reasons to linger over dinner with another person, even without mutual esteem", that the pages of *Little Did I Know* in which Williams also appears are always steeped in considerations of philosophical issues. This indicates that the friendship between the two is indeed remembered by Cavell, and even fondly (it is touching to think that 2003 is also the year of Williams's death), but above all the philosophical exchange between the two is remembered and recorded.

One of the points touched on by the two philosophers during their convivial exchanges is the role of writing in philosophy. How important is it? Why is it important? And why does Cavell close his note of 17 August 2003 with the scene of the two friends about to part, after months of affection, discussion and exchange, and with Cavell seizing the moment (or the marble) and hurling a comment with force at his friend, making "a risky plunge"? What importance should be attached to this moment? Certainly for Cavell himself it was an important moment in his life, if we think of the fact that when he first recorded the memory of his recently deceased friend in his intellectual autobiography, his mind immediately went there.

Let us therefore dwell on their brief but intense exchange on this philosophical-literary point. Cavell — out of friendship — risks saying to Williams something that, most likely, no one (especially no philosopher with ambitions as a writer) would want to hear: "Look, you are better in person than in your writing. You write worse than you are. You are much more interesting in person". For a novelist this would be a fatal accusation, but for a philosopher it might not be.

---

[227] *Little Did I Know, cit.*, p. 150.

Yet Williams is aware of this fact, he himself recognises it as his limitation; but not only that, as a limitation he intends to overcome in the future (revealing himself to be at least a perfectionist in the ordinary sense of the word). We have already mentioned that Cavell at this point bites his tongue and keeps to himself his idea that 'one must perpetually write better than one is'. This idea is held back by Cavell and branded as nonsense; the kind of nonsense that Williams has been able to put up with in their mutual conversations, but which Cavell now fears is too much.

Now, let us ask ourselves: why might a sentence like 'You must perpetually write better than you are' be *too much* in a friendly exchange? To me, personally, one answer that comes to mind is this: faced with the peremptory nature of that warning, a more balanced interlocutor would respond with a simple "It depends". It depends on what goals writers bring with them. Journalists, for instance, do not have to constantly write better than they are; not even professors, for that matter. Indeed, professors might be much more inspiring in class, *viva voce*, than in their writing. Evidently, Cavell assigns writing a central importance for his image of philosophy. And it is also for this reason, we can surmise, that he spends so much time in his autobiography talking about the travails involved in writing his doctoral thesis, and his subsequent discontent at the news that his newly published book, *The Claim of Reason*, had received either negative reviews or substantial disinterest from the academic world.

The writer of an autobiography who has the arrogance of being able to address other people and, in the future, count for something for them, become part of their lives, is concerned with 'writing better than one is'. Otherwise, one's text would be nothing more than a list of private facts, of interest to no one. So we are back again to Bernard Williams's admonition: one must be careful about writing about one's life, because one runs the risk of producing bad literature.

At this point, it remains to be conjectured why Williams, according to Cavell's feelings, would not have agreed with or understood, or would have judged as nonsensical, the admonition that 'one must perpetually write better than one is'. One hypothesis might be this: Williams could easily have thought that no one imposes this need on us; philosophers could certainly write worse than they are; or, at any rate, it would not be central to their enterprise if they failed to set themselves the goal of this constant self-overcoming of their literary abilities. Yet it would be arguable that Williams himself has moved in a horizon of constant self-overcoming in his own writing journey: recognising that he could *sharpen and sharpen* his style, he has admitted that he considers the ideal of literary

self-overcoming a good ideal. However — and this is the central point — Williams was also aware of the limits that philosophical literature brings with it. For this reason, he was always suspicious of philosophers who expressed themselves in grandiose and kitschy tones; they, we might say, represent the exact opposite of philosophers with a cold and dogmatic tone: they demand too much from philosophical writing, while the latter demand too little. Instead, how much did Williams demand of writing during his lifetime?

A good clue to this is again provided by the aforementioned Introduction to *Shame and Necessity*, in which Williams approvingly quotes a statement by T. S. Eliot:

> Scholarship, at least when it tries to say anything interesting, cannot travel entirely on its own credentials. The truth is that we all have to do more things than we can rightly do, if we are to do anything at all. As T. S. Eliot put it, "of course one can 'go too far' and except in directions in which we can go too far there is no interest in going at all; and only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go".[228]

As Eliot's statement makes clear, there is a risk inherent in all endeavors that claim to arrive at something interesting. One cannot know in advance where the interest sought will reside, and above all how it will be found, so there is a need to take risks. Undoubtedly, this dimension of risk is linked by Williams himself to the literary enterprise in philosophy. More precisely, however, the point Williams wants to drive home in the context of the Introduction to *Shame and Necessity* is that, even if he as a philosopher does not possess all the adequate credentials to set up a discourse and research on the ancient world, he will still try. But hybridization between fields of study is not the only risk Williams takes in writing about philosophy. Indeed, his texts are peppered with observations, attempts, and anxieties about being able to write honestly and truthfully. And — one might ask at this point — what literary genre better than an autobiography of some sort allows one to put before one's readers a genuine, truthful account of one's life and interests?

As reported in an interview with Williams by Stuart Jeffries, we read how he took the idea of writing his own autobiography very seriously. We read the end of this interview, significantly titled 'The Quest for Truth':

---

[228] *Shame and Necessity*, *cit.*, p. x.

Williams is not so ill that he has given up writing projects. He's planning to publish some of his occasional pieces on opera, and is considering writing a book about his encounters with politicians. That's just a glint in the eye right now. Has he considered a truth-telling or at least storytelling autobiography? 'I take the idea of writing an autobiography immensely seriously. Bill Buford got me to write something about my schooldays and he explained why this wasn't going to be a success as writing. I learned a lot from that – mostly negative. I think my virtues, certainly as a writer, are manifest in a different way'.[229]

In this final interview, bare, raw life immediately breaks in. We discover that Williams is ill. But not so ill as to have stopped planning new writings. There is mention of a possible collection of texts that have already been published on opera (and which will actually be published in 2006), and of a book that collects Williams's encounters with politicians (a book that unfortunately didn't reach us, being only "a glint in the eye" at the time). Then there is talk of an autobiography. We know very little about this project. Bill Buford, an American journalist and writer, had encouraged Williams to write an autobiographical piece about his school years and showed him how this venture was not destined to be a success. Of Buford's comments, and what Williams learned, we know nothing. The interview ends with Williams stating that his qualities as a writer manifest themselves in a different way.

I believe that Williams's illness facilitated showing where his qualities as a writer lie. When he discovered he was ill, Williams had been thinking about a project on the idea of truthfulness for some time. As his cancer accelerated, and not knowing how much longer he had to live, Williams rushed to complete this project. It is 'an essay in genealogy'. Reading the text from the first to the last line, one breathes a tension that is not exclusively academic. Besides, Williams is already retired and has just been diagnosed with cancer: why should he have to complete this writing? If he did not imagine that this text could have a future? What if he did not think it important that the ideas cultivated in this book — and in his entire oeuvre, of which this book is a great and moving compendium — should find an audience? For at the end of the first part of the first chapter, called *Truthfulness and Truth*, we read: "But I shall claim [...] that to the extent that we lose a sense of the

---

[229] "The Quest for Truth", *cit*.

value of truth, we shall certainly lose something and may well lose everything".[230] Williams's appeal is to a future audience. Even as death approaches, Williams does not give up uttering the magic word 'we'. Who is he addressing? Is this book only addressed to students of philosophy? Or more generally to people of culture? One might say: those who learn to read it properly. It will be a goal of Section 4.2 and Section 5.2 to try to delve more deeply into the answers to these questions, not only with reference to *Truth and Truthfulness* (Section 4.2) but to Williams's complete work (Section 5.2).

As Williams well knew, every enterprise has its limits, limits that cannot be defined a priori, but that once one's path has been mapped out, inevitably become defined. What do I mean? I mean that the audience of *Truth and Truthfulness* is inevitably different from the audience of *Little Did I Know*. However, both books arise from the news of impending death. They are both characterized by what is usually called 'late style' (and about which Edward Said wrote a beautiful, posthumous book).[231] Investigating the differences between these last two works by Cavell and Williams could help us to grasp the difference between their aims in philosophy, the image of the philosopher they cultivated in life (and especially in that life approaching death) and the final chapter of their search for a style in philosophy.

And yet, someone might ask: 'How is it possible to compare, stylistically, such different works as an autobiography and an essay?' Certainly, the common element in both texts is that they are last works, and we have already observed how a last work — written as death approaches — can reveal the sense of all (or at least a good part) of the path an author has tried to trace in life. In fact, in some cases, the last work succeeds in revealing, in a rather intense way, the hopes and fears, the strengths and weaknesses of the authors; it succeeds in giving us a last, intense taste of their *temperament* and their *personality*. (Let us just think, among the countless examples, of Stanley Kubrick's last work, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999): how much of Kubrick's everything is contained in that masterpiece?). In this sense, what better text than *On Certainty* is able to reveal the Wittgensteinian temperament? Fragmentary, skeptical, insistent, illuminating, patient, precise, human, imaginative... Of course, much of *On Certainty*'s style is determined by his object of inquiry: how

---

[230] *Truth and Truthfulness, cit.*, p. 7.

[231] E. Said, *On Late Style. Music and Literature Against the Grain*, New York, Random House Inc, 2006.

stable is our epistemological hold on the world? How much is it subject to variation? When is a doubt sensible? When senseless? What is the foundation of our beliefs — and what is it made of? Epistemological, ethical and psychological questions mixed together, in the classic Wittgensteinian *blend* (historical or political considerations are almost absent, however).

Now, in the case of Williams and Cavell, a further obstacle to the comparison of their latest works is provided not only by their form (their employing a different and distant literary genre, such as the autobiography and the essay), but also by their object of investigation. In Cavell's case, the object of inquiry is his own life; in Williams's case, on the other hand, the object of inquiry are what he calls the two virtues of truthfulness (*Sincerity* and *Accuracy*, written as terms of art), which emerge from a genealogical analysis of the concept of truthfulness. In his book on 'late style', Edward Said has collected essays on several authors for whom the last works represented a tormented drafting, the result of an intense and final struggle with themselves. Among these are Beethoven and Tomasi di Lampedusa.

We can therefore ask ourselves: are Williams and Cavell perhaps more pacified authors? Not struggling with themselves in the process of death? I believe that they both give life to a philosophical struggle, but that the struggle has a different background, thematically different. And the diversity of the background is due precisely to the diversity of their object of inquiry. The Williamsian genealogy, in fact, brings out a diffusely *political* background; while, in Cavell, the excavation of his own mind and history brings out a diffusely *psychological* picture. It is Cavell himself who reveals this fact about himself and his attitudes: "If there are two kinds of people, those whose instinct of response to a crisis is primarily political and those whose instinct is psychological, I suppose I belong to the latter kind".[232] What about Williams? In the light of his biography, and the volume of his writings on the subject (not only *Truth and Truthfulness*, but also *In the Beginning was the Deed*, published posthumously) we can affirm that Williams, instead, belongs to the kind of people for whom the instinct of response to a crisis is primarily political. The final appeal, which marks the last lines of *Truth and Truthfulness*, leaves no doubt about this:

> The hope is that [the virtues of truth] will keep going in something like the more courageous, intransigent, and socially effective forms that they have acquired over their history; that some institutions

---

[232] *Little Did I Know*, *cit.*, p. 430.

can exist that will both support and express them; that the ways in which future people will come to make sense of things will enable them to see the truth and not be broken by it.[233]

Let us now focus on the differences in temperament between the two philosophers. And let us begin with Stanley Cavell. Cavell's autobiography reveals an aspect that is almost always present in his production: a constant focus on and re-presentation of the questions 'How can we change our lives? How can we move from one stage to another?' One of his late works (published after the age of sixty) takes the title *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (1989), and the passage from which this title is taken comes from an essay by Emerson: "I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West".[234] At the end of his life, rather than exclusively taking examples from literature or film or philosophy or his own imagination, Cavell examines *his own life*. 'To die in order to be born again': these are Emerson's words and these are the moments that interest Cavell. The small daily deaths are described and remembered in Cavell's autobiography, and they begin very early. Cavell speaks of his loneliness as a child, of the countless moves he had to adapt to, of his relationship with his father and mother, of his first friendships and first loves, of his name change, of the beginning — and interruption — of his studies in music, of his newfound path to philosophy; and, finally, of the tortuous path he followed *to remain there*. At first glance, this work seems to have an exclusively psychological relevance: we penetrate into the meanders of Cavell's memory and we observe him live (during his childhood, passing through adolescence, up to adulthood and old age). What do we draw from it? *Little portraits of everyday life*. Cavell brings philosophy back onto the tracks of the ordinary starting from his own life: reliving, remembering with us readers the moments of alienation that led him to mature — and to see others mature — that skeptical impulse (of rejection of oneself, of others, and of the world: in short, a *depressive* impulse)[235] on which he will focus and write all his life. Williams recognizes this impulse as authentically philosophical, yet places his book on a more explicitly political horizon:

---

[233] *Truth and Truthfulness*, *cit.*, p. 7.

[234] R. W. Emerson, "Experience", in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, cit.*, pp. 254–273, p. 267.

[235] S. Cavell, "Time after Time", *Here and There. Sites of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2022, 21–32, p. 29.

Everyday truths are important, and their importance should be stressed, for several reasons. One is a central concern of this book: their role in an account of truth and meaning, and in constructing a philosophical anthropology. Second, everyone knows that there are everyday truths, and what many of them are. Philosophy here, on lines variously laid down by Hume, Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, needs to recall us to the everyday. All these writers, however, want to recall us to the everyday from the personal alienation of a fantastic philosophical scepticism which claims to doubt that there is an external world, or past time, or other minds. For our present concerns, the recall to the everyday (to the kinds of everyday truths that everyone recognizes) is from a politicized state of denial which is not so much an alienation from the shared world as a condition of sharing in an alienated world.[236]

Alienation is the central word here. Philosophy — in both perspectives, the Cavellian and the Williamsian — has to do with self-knowledge and with overcoming the obstacles encountered on this path. In Cavell's case, alienation is overcome by taking the floor, by making one's voice heard and by recounting (verbally or in writing), as in all those cases in which one enacts a *cogito* performance (this is a Cavellian idea, inspired by Descartes: to put it briefly, one affirms one's existence, through a declaration and expression of oneself. Cases of this kind are studied by Cavell in *Contesting Tears*, his book on melodrama);[237] whereas in Williams's case, self-knowledge is largely due to an awareness of the history from which one derives (and the possible alternatives one could have taken).

This is Williams's main objection to Cavell in *Philosophy as Humanistic Discipline* (2000):

It is true that Cavell's own project, unlike Wittgenstein's, does often seek to engage with history or our present cultural situation, particularly through its involvement with modernism. But, granted its general presuppositions, in some part derived from the practice of Wittgenstein, this engagement is itself conducted in metaphysical terms, and this leaves room for not much more than the thought that there is something specially about the modern world that is metaphysically alienating. This then tends to impose an image of a fall from primal unity, and at this stage, it is not surprising that Heideggerian resonances are to be heard.[238]

---

[236] *Truth and Truthfulness*, *cit.*, p. 10.

[237] S. Cavell, *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

[238] *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, *cit.*, p. 210.

Williams's criticism of Cavell is that his prose risks carrying with it traces of metaphysics. How are we to understand the skeptical grip to which we can all fall prey? As a distinctively modern condition? In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, in fact, there is no trace of *a historical answer to the problem of skepticism*. Certainly, for Cavell — as for Williams — nihilism represents a supreme form of skepticism, but this is not investigated too much in *historical* terms, but mainly in psychological and literary ones. Through Emerson, and the response of self-confidence, Cavell finds an answer to give to the skeptic. Yet at the level of 'self-confidence as a solution', we are still on too abstract a plane. *When to experience self-confidence? At what point? Where do we find ourselves?* Will each person evaluate for themselves? Cavell, in fact, can do no more than reason by examples, drawn primarily from literature and film. Yet a reservation remains — how can one generalize such a particular reading?

But the point of Cavell's philosophizing is to read as deeply — idiosyncratically — as possible in order to stimulate the reader to do the same. (As his students testify, this is Cavell's main influence on them).[239] I have decided that, instead of focusing on how this metaphilosophical point is expressed to the fullest extent in his autobiography, in Section 4.1 I will dwell on how the same point is developed in a more programmatic text, *The Uncanniness of the Ordinary*. Here Cavell, at the age of 60, presents the outlines of his mature metaphilosophy, a metaphilosophy already shaped by his philosophical style. In fact, it is a metaphilosophy that he found himself taking on as a result of what he chose — and found himself choosing — as most appropriate for his own writing style.

In a paradoxical way, it can be said that Cavell's writing is shaped by his way of reading. In fact, it is only after understanding the peculiarity of Cavell's reading, his playful and adventurous spirit, along with his assonances with psychoanalysis, that one is able to better delineate the contours of the type of philosopher he embodied in his philosophical production.

Since this is a difficult point to grasp in the absence of examples, and especially difficult because of its ambiguity and elusiveness, Cavell finds an allegorical example within the baggage of American literature. He sees his way of proceeding and the kind of philosopher akin to the spirit of his inquiry allegorised within Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. This is one of the claims of *The*

---

[239] See, for instance, the contributions of the special commemorative issue of *Conversations. The Journal of Cavellian Studies*, No. 7, 2019, called "Acknowledging Stanley Cavell", edited by David LaRocca.

Uncanniness of the Ordinary. Yet, in this piece, Cavell only hints at the significance of this tale for understanding an important aspect of his philosophical style. It will be my task in Section 4.1 to better understand how far this analysis of Poe's text takes us if we are to delineate the kind of philosopher Cavell chose — and found himself choosing — to embody.

Thus, for Cavell, philosophy becomes a revelation of one's own self-confidence in one's ability to read, as well as in recounting one's life. Recounting one's life is the perfect example of the Wittgensteinian "this is simply what I do" — indeed, "that is simply what I have done". The sincere and accurate account of one's own life will thus succeed in acting in favor of that perfectionist register that Cavell so much recommended at the end of his life: averse to moralism (one reveals one's own position, and does not pretend to speak for others); interested in the passages of moral life, in moments of change and crisis; based on self-reliance, and not on anything external to the agent. (In passing, one could note a slightly different figure of the philosopher emerging than the Wittgensteinian: for instance, the Rousseauian. Precisely because of the perfectionist transfiguration of the ordinary that he operated in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.)

Williams, on the other hand, although openly Nietzschean, in the last phase of his life found himself (once again) very close not only to Nietzsche but also to Hume. Precisely because of his being English and *reserved*. The last Nietzsche, in fact, writes a dense autobiography in which he comments on all his works (an operation that finds an echo in Cavell's writing, in the moments in which he remembers the reception and the judgment on his past works). In contrast, the later Hume composes an autobiography of only a few pages. Thus, we might then say that, at the end of his own life, Hume's writing is moved far more by *curiosity* (and indeed the great effort of the last years of his life is the composition of the History of England) than by the *desire for salvation* (to which instead Rousseau seems to entrust his last literary work, consigned to an "afterlife of words", as Eli Friedlander writes).[240] In the Preface of *Essays and Reviews* (1959-2002), the volume of articles, essays and reviews by Williams, published posthumously, Michael Wood quotes and comments on this passage by Williams:

> "As Plato knew, the road to something helpful is not only hard, but unpredictable, and the motives that
>
> keep people moving down it don't necessarily have to do with the desire to help. They include that other

---

[240] E. Friedlander, *J. J. Rousseau, An Afterlife of Words*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004.

motive of philosophy, curiosity. In fact, the two motives cannot really be taken apart; the philosophy that is concerned to be helpful cannot be separated from philosophy that aims to help us to understand."

This is a very intricate claim. Philosophy often wants to help—"the starting point of philosophy is that we do not understand ourselves well enough", as I have already quoted Williams as saying—but philosophers themselves may have nothing in mind but their own puzzlement.[241]

Curiosity and salvation: these are both motivations present in Williams and Cavell. Although, at first glance, and on a first reading, Williams seems unbalanced on the side of *curiosity*; while Cavell (again at first glance and on a first reading) seems unbalanced on the side of *salvation*. In reality — as I will try to show in what follows — both dimensions are present in both philosophers. In the next chapter, in fact, I will investigate the different temperaments of the two philosophers, who both are motivated by curiosity and salvation but for different reasons and aims.

In Section 4.1, we will see how a certain sense of playfulness and adventure animates Cavell's philosophical style. This factor illuminates an aspect of his proceeding that is more shifted to the side of curiosity: indeed, to interrogate a text without qualms, and without knowing in advance what it may reveal to us, one must be animated by a good dose of curiosity and openness to the unknown. Yet, playful adventurousness curiosity and openness, interrogating them more closely, turn out to be directed towards creating a specific relationship with its readers who — analogous to the analyst-patient relationship — are stimulated to search for their own voice and to pull the strings of their own story from the voice of someone else, *external and outsider to them*, who confronts them with themselves.

In this image or allegory, the philosopher takes on the guise of the odd detective Auguste Dupin, who is able to make the queen of Paris recover her own letter simply by showing her something that she had in front of her eyes all along, but insisted on searching in the depths; when it was enough to dwell on the superficial and ordinary aspects of the matter. In this allegory, helping the queen to recover the letter also means helping her recover, and safeguard, a part of herself that she was neglecting or forgetting. Curiosity and salvation are thus intertwined. The kind of philosopher represented by Cavell, occupying an outsider's position, succeeds in reenacting and safeguarding in

---

[241] *Essays and Reviews, cit.*, p. xvi.

readers (just as the psychoanalyst succeeds in reenacting and safeguarding in patients) the desire to explore their own lives, showing how all the elements to do so are in front of them.

In Section 4.2, I will investigate the type of philosopher embodied by Bernard Williams. This is a different type from Cavell's. Here too, however, curiosity and salvation seem to be the two main motives. Although, as in the case of Cavell, they are intertwined in a way that is not obvious or immediate. For example, as far as Williams is concerned, the type of philosopher he favors can be allegorised by a story he himself chose to describe the idea of authenticity. I am talking about *Rameau's Nephew*. The type of philosopher encouraged by Williams is a dialectical figure, who comes into contact with both the more academic tendencies of his time, but who does not shy away from confronting even the most radical and destructive criticisms aimed at the discipline and its public role. In Section 4.2, after a brief analysis of Williams's commentary on *Rameau's Nephew*, will be considered two of his responses to a young Perry Anderson (by an equally young, at least not yet fully adult, Williams), in 1957, and to a mature Roger Scruton, in 1996. Common trait of both responses is a certain attitude of Williams to take seriously the critical instances of the two figures — one Marxist and the other conservative — against the professional environment of Oxford and Cambridge philosophy (and, more generally, England). In the detailed responses to both philosophers, it is possible to get a good understanding of the contours of the figure of the philosopher to whom Williams feels closest; a dialectical figure, indeed, and one that encompasses within itself the instances of both characters in the dialogue *Rameau's Nephew*: both the more reflective one, embodied by the figure of the philosophy professor, of the intellectual; and the more spontaneous and emotional ones, embodied by the figure of Rameau's nephew himself, bearer of a less sophisticated but certainly more direct and immediate vision of moral life. The type of philosopher embodied by Williams, being dialectical, is built in the dialogue between these two instances, each taken seriously, each preserved, but neither taken separately from the other. Preserving this sense of integrity, even though in dialectical terms, shows us a Williams interested in a secular version of the issue of salvation: for him, it is important to live up to an ideal of authenticity, politically and socially stabilized, of course, but nevertheless present and alive. Not just the need for curiosity, then, inspires him, but also the need to save one's own integrity (both personal and philosophical).

Furthermore, Sections 5.1 and 5.2 will constitute deepenings, both quantitative, of the insights advanced on the qualitative level. Indeed, in Section 5.1, which will study Cavell's use of parentheses from a quantitative point of view, we will see that the type of philosopher Cavell's philosophical style gives life to is certainly an intimate, human type, which does not renounce the tone of voice and style that seems to find no place in strictly academic prose. The quantification of the parenthetical space will show how Cavell uses parentheses as a place in which to change tone; the parenthesis, full of dubitative, concessive subordinations, direct question marks, and uses of the second person (preferred to the first and third, as it is intended to address the reader directly), thus constitutes a space in which Cavell can enter into a connection directly with his readers — as in the model described in Section 4.1. Of course, Section 5.1 could be thought of also as a deepening of the stylistic method of Section 3.2, but, for my purposes, it would be much more relevant to investigate the type of philosopher — the more intimate, personal, psychoanalytic type — that already emerged in Section 4.1 and that will be deepened, in a quantitative way, in Section 5.1.

On the other hand, as far as Section 5.2 is concerned, it will be adequate to confirm the dialectical and more political nature of Williams's figure. Indeed, through the work of quantification, we will be able to observe how Williams presents himself in the cultural sphere in the guise of the academic philosopher and, conversely, infects the academic sphere with cultural references. Such a study will be able to deepen the insight of Section 4.2, in which the dialectical nature of the type of philosopher embodied by Williams was suggested, and in which two individual contributions by him were considered as representative of his entire oeuvre. In the final section, however, the whole Williamsian textual corpus will be considered, and the reflections advanced will be much more significant for an overall assessment of his philosophical style.

4. Chapter Four: The Outsider and the Maverick

4.1 Outsider, Other, Odd. Cavell reads *The Purloined Letter*

Introduction

When Stanley Cavell's *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990) was published, one reviewer wrote: "As an immigrant in many disciplines, Cavell often speaks to audiences that wonder how to take him, since he seems to be too literary for some philosophers' tastes, too philosophical for some literary critics, insufficiently psychological for some Freudians, perhaps not qualified enough for some feminist film theorists. Sometimes Cavell has not been met with the hospitality travelers used to receive, nor has he always found the openness among groups who claim to have open arms for the Other".[242] In this section, I am going to look at only one of these facets: namely, how Cavell has presented himself in a way that seems too literary for some philosophers' tastes.

Also drawing on *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Arthur Danto wrote that "Cavell reads Wittgenstein the way a gifted literary critic would read him"[243] — implying that, however brilliant, his way of reading texts distances him from the typical ways of a certain philosophical style. Philosophers, for Danto, need not be interested in the linguistic subtleties of texts; they must, first and foremost, provide arguments. Cavell's way of reacting against what Danto called "the

---

[242] B. Krajewski, "Review of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*", *Philosophy and Literature*, 17, 1, 1993, 156–158, p. 157.

[243] A. Danto, "In Their Own Voice: Philosophical Writing and Actual Experience", in *The Body/Body Problem. Selected Essays*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996, 227–246, p. 232. However, Danto's metaphilosophy is far more complex than this brief mention might suggest. Danto's essay, in fact, contains at least two views. The first is what he calls the "bottom-line view of philosophy", according to which: "After all — as I myself have argued here — the voice does not really penetrate the philosophy; the philosophy is the arguments; that the question is in the end whether or not X was right about Y, and it does not matter who comes up with the good answer, its goodness being independent of who comes up with it". Yet, it is Danto's interest to complicate this narrow view of philosophy. His whole essay is an attempt to enrich that view, and it is an attempt that lands in Danto's final exhortation that: "Philosophers should be encouraged to speak in their own voice about the world that means something to them. The freer the voice, the better the philosophy". Here, for reasons of space, I will not go into more detail about Danto's metaphilosophy.

bottom-line view of philosophy" (i.e. philosophy is *just* arguments) consisted in transgressing some of the rules that govern such a view. Playfulness is the spirit which partly animated that transgression.

A sharp distinction between the literary and the philosophical is indeed a rule that guides and orientates much of contemporary professional philosophy. Some ways of reading (and of writing) can turn one into a gifted literary critic, and not *strictly* into a philosopher. However, we may ask: why would one want to be *strictly* a philosopher? As the adverb "strictly" suggests, being adherent to the rules makes one more serious, but at the same time more uptight. And an uptight worry is expressed by asking: if there is no shared ground in which philosophy is instituted, wouldn't that activity be too arbitrary? A gifted literary critic sometimes has nothing more but one's ear and one's brilliance to read a work. But philosophy concerns itself with problems, not so much with texts. Well, does it? What we might call Cavell's metaphilosophy finds itself in the aspiration to consider philosophy not so much "as a set of problems", but primarily "as a set of texts".[244] Of course, this doesn't imply that the philosophical problems simply lose importance, or disappear. But what is to be counted as philosophy (or philosophical) is not to be judged *a priori*, from the outset — it has to emerge through the very activities of reading and writing.

A type of philosopher like Cavell, challenging the institutional setting he finds himself into, wants to go his own way and do philosophy also by other means — that is to say, by other than the standardized methods of reading and writing. In an institution like a university, there is a feeling and an expectation that one should read and write in a certain way. What we can call 'serious writing' is encouraged and, at the end of the day (but, one also hopes, at the end of every month), paid, economically rewarded. What is to be counted as serious has more or less definite requisites: read the relevant literature, do not rush your writing with wild claims, be cautious... This is what we might call, in psychoanalytic terms, 'the superego of contemporary professional philosophy'.[245]

---

[244] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. 3. See *infra* pp. 144-145.

[245] For instance, in "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline" (2000), Bernard Williams spoke of "an intimidatingly nit-picking superego" of philosophers, "a blend of their most impressive teachers and their most competitive colleagues, which guides their writing by means of constant anticipations of guilt and shame". See *infra* pp. 129-130.

For Cavell it is empty to ask: how *should* one write philosophy? Rather, he invites to ask ourselves: *what interests me*?[246] And — this is the crucial point — when the superego will set strict limits to the exploration of one's interests, Cavell reacts by claiming: "In philosophy it is *the sound* that makes all the difference"[247] and this is the sound of one's own voice. How I read that claim is by interrogating it through the lens of the so-called ordinary language philosophy — the philosophical movement that allowed Cavell to find his own way into philosophy. Rather sketchily, we can understand ordinary language philosophy as that philosophical approach practiced by J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein (and some of their pupils). In all their differences, these philosophers thought that 'philosophical claims' should be answerable to 'ordinary language uses'.[248]

What interests me here about this relation between 'philosophical claims' and 'ordinary language uses' lies in the understanding of the word *uses*. How we use language is not determined *a priori*. But, when we think about it, and we find ourselves looking for words to use, a language is already there for us. It is not made by us, but we have inherited it. Now, Cavell's novelty in relation to these very basic tenets of ordinary language philosophy is related to our *self-expression*.

When we find ourselves using language, at first, we do it naïvely; as soon as we grow up, we begin to use language more and more self-reflectively. Philosophers in the university are, like every adult, such self-reflective beings; but they are, always like adults, also prone to all sorts of confusions and delusions. They might never find out how *they* would like to use language, if they are never "trying out". Well, why wouldn't philosophers "try out" their language? And discover what they mean when they say … pretty much anything?

---

[246] This question is guiding Cavell's writing right from the very beginning. In *Little Did I Know* (2010), he recounts having written his paper for Austin's classes at Harvard, in the summer of 1955, "The Theatricality of Everyday Life" (which then transformed in 1958 into *Must We Mean What We Say?*) thinking it to be, surely, not so much "a letter to the world" but "an address to a master"; in any case — Cavell continues — "it was still a cry from the heart". *Little Did I Know*, *cit.*, p. 340.

[247] *Must We Mean What We Say?*, *cit.*, p. 36, note 31. Emphasis added. See also Lola Seaton's recently published article on *The Point*: L. Seaton, "The Sound Makes All the Difference. Stanley Cavell's Style", *The Point*, Issue 28, October 18, 2022.

[248] Apart from the essay that gives the title to the collection (i.e, "Must We Mean What We Say?") see also "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" and "Austin at Criticism", again in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, *cit.*

In contemporary professional philosophy, there are forces or images which might prevent one from exploring such territories. Types of philosophers like Russell and Quine of course agree with Austin and Wittgenstein that we inherit a language, and that our ordinary or everyday usage represents the first word in our life as adults and in our life as philosophers. However, they also think that we must overcome ordinary language's influence, and go beyond its erroneous and inaccurate use. These types of philosophers want to move beyond this usage and criticize Austin and the later Wittgenstein instead for wanting us to return to our everyday usage, forcing us to make no progress in philosophy. Cavell writes that the aspiration of these philosophers is "an aspiration for purity"[249] that causes them to abandon everyday language, transform it, refine it in order to make it more precise. There is, however, also a second sense in which ordinary language represents the first word in philosophy, and it is the sense that philosophers like Austin and Cavell are most interested in. It is a first word that is not to be forgotten, abandoned, but a first word that is to be kept in mind, remembered, reclaimed. In one of his very last published essays, *The Touch of Words*, in order to describe this second approach Cavell speaks of an "attachment to our words".[250] What he means is that some philosophers — such as, among many, Nietzsche and Heidegger — philosophize with an ambivalent attitude toward their native, natural, ordinary language. They do not consider it *a priori* as the first step of a ladder that will lead to ever greater perfection; a first tool that will later be abandoned in view of a purer, more precise and refined instrument. But they take it seriously, they question it, they use it. To employ a word that is itself ambivalent: *they play with it*.

How is it possible to both take language seriously and play with it? To take language seriously, in this image of philosophy, is "to listen" to what we say. As we would listen to a friend: we don't really know what they mean when they say things, we try to imagine and to stay close to them, helping them, sorting things out with them... What is at stake might be really serious, but how we go about can be *playful*. But what do I mean with playful? I have already gathered some forms of playfulness and it might be worth it to underline them more explicitly: playfulness as transgression of rules; but also playfulness as spontaneity and anti-instrumentality. If we want to proceed like Russell and Quine, for instance, then it makes sense for us to search for an artificial, perfected language that will

[249] S. Cavell, "The Touch of Words", in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew. New Essays on Aspect-Seeing*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 81–98, p. 86.

[250] *Ibidem*.

help us to achieve our goals. For a philosophical approach which doesn't know one's goals in advance, however, spontaneity and anti-instrumentality are the heart of it. For what is to count as the aim of one's inquiry will be discovered along the way.[251] We start with an impulse; then we spell it out by talking; we keep talking to ourselves and to others until we find our way out. Wittgenstein famously (and metaphorically) described his aim in philosophy like this: "To show the fly (*the impulse*, in Cavellian terms) out of the fly bottle".[252] Wittgenstein was also interested in what might prevent a philosopher from exploring one's impulses. For instance, it might be *fear* of oneself.[253] However, by overcoming one's fear through speaking, one can realize that what one had to say made some sense after all. It won't be *the last word* but, until it wasn't said, its own repression risked stifling the individual's expressiveness.

A third sense of playfulness, then, consists in *the slackening of the self*. While an uptight pose that consists in retaining one's own thought would be the opposite stance. Uptightness — speaking in Freudian terms — can prevent the *I* to follow the directions hinted at by the *Id* (that is, by one's own impulses). But the impulses alone aren't enough. They need to be deepened, and they need to have enough space to develop in something more than impulses. Cavell would refer to this fact by quoting Emerson: "Intuition requires Tuition".[254] The intuitions require to be disciplined, but not in a disciplinary way.

In the quoted review of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* Cavell was described as an "immigrant in many disciplines" — and I think that the reviewer wanted to capture this sense of entering a new area, discovering a new field, without letting oneself be ruled by its own legislation. I have decided to investigate precisely this untamed feature of Cavell in his reading of *The Purloined Letter*, one of those readings that might have irritated some more disciplinary philosophers, urging them to accuse Cavell of being *too* literary.

---

[251] In *Cities of Words* (2004), Cavell reflects on his own philosophical approach and refers to "a mode of philosophical attention in which you are prepared to *be taken by surprise*" (emphasis added). S. Cavell, *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 15.

[252] See *Philosophical Investigations*, *cit.*, p. 110.

[253] See *Culture and Value*, *cit.*, p. 56e : "Don't *for heaven's sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense".

[254] See *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, *cit.*, p. 102.

I can imagine that a similar accusation was made — and is still made — to Jacques Lacan for his decision to open his *Écrits* with a (much longer) reading of *The Purloined Letter* as well.[255] In fact, one could ask him: if psychoanalysis is a science or at least a founded discipline, why play with literature? Must not literature provide at best an illustration of something that can certainly be said, and exhausted, in more scientific and disciplinary ways? In the *Interview with Panorama* (very useful as a precise and detailed summary of his approach), Lacan answers the question, "What is psychoanalysis?", like this: "Psychoanalysis is not a faith, and I don't like calling it a science. Let's say it's a practice, and that it's concerned with what's not working out".[256] This is also one of the concerns of literature, and, in particular, of *The Purloined Letter*.

Despite its celebrity, I will not subtract myself from giving at least a minimal recounting of the story: we are in the 19th century, the Queen of Paris keeps a very sensitive letter (whose content we do not know) on her desk, a letter that might incriminate her in the eyes of the King. If the King discovers the letter, she will be in great trouble. One day, a character called "Minister D." finds the letter, right in the exact moment when the Queen is in the presence of the King. Under her very nose, he steals it (and she can't do nothing about it: if she reacts, then the King will know that there is something going on). Now the letter has to be found and someone has to find it. The Prefect of the Police of Paris has been assigned by the Queen the task of finding the letter. The Police employs every possible method, they use all the techniques in their power: they search into the tables, in every corner of the room, in all the pages of the books; but nothing, the letter remains hidden in the apartment of the Minister (and it must be there: the letter is so important that the Minister must keep it in his own space, it has to have control over it). Then the Prefect, quite desperate, assigns the task to an acquaintance of his, Auguste Dupin, known for his unconventional methods. Dupin will be able to retrace the letter by putting himself in the mind of the Minister; by trying to think as he could have thought. And the Minister, suspecting that the Police would have employed all means possible in order to trace the letter, decided to hide it in plain sight (like the Queen was hiding it in the first scene), where no one was expecting it to be.

---

[255] J. Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink, New York, W.W.Norton & Company Inc., 2006.

[256] J. Lacan, "Freud Forever: An Interview with *Panorama*", *Hurly-Burly*, Issue 12, January 2015, 13–21, p. 14.

Of course, Cavell is aware of the mass of interpretations that Poe's text has generated and that are collected, for example, in the volume *The Purloined Poe. Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (1987).[257] Of these interpretations, those with which Cavell intends to confront are that of Lacan but also that of the literary critic Shoshana Felman's. The novelty introduced by Cavell, with respect to Lacan and Felman, consists in his aim of tracing, reading *The Purloined Letter*, what he calls "an allegory of ordinary language philosophy". Let us read directly Cavell: "[I will] go over the tale again just far enough to indicate (something that has surprised me, even alarmed me) that it also forms at least as exact and developed an allegory of ordinary language philosophy. The sense of this application is given in Poe's tale's all but identifying itself as a study — and hence perhaps as an act — of mind-reading".[258] Poe's tale is thus centered on the theme of *other minds reading*. It is at this level that Cavell identifies *The Purloined Letter* as an allegory of ordinary language philosophy.

Before going into detail by commenting on two scenes from Poe's tale, however, Cavell gives two examples, one from Austin and the other from Wittgenstein, of how their linguistic approach to philosophy generated — and still generates — a reaction that Cavell calls one of "offense".[259] However, I will not take into account Cavell's reading of Austin and Wittgenstein, because I am mostly interested in the kind of "offense" that Cavell thinks his own approach generates. It is an offense that Cavell sets out to illuminate through a reading of two scenes from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*.

The Offense of the Odd

Let us start with the first scene. In this scene, in which the Prefect of Paris visits Detective Dupin to announce the case of the stolen letter, Cavell is struck by the use of the word *odd*:

"If it is any point requiring reflection," observed Dupin, as he forebore to enkindle the wick, "we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark."

---

[257] J. P. Muller-W. J. Richardson, *The Purloined Poe. Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.

[258] *In Quest of the Ordinary, cit.*, p. 161.

[259] *Ibidem.*

"That is another of your odd notions," said the Prefect, who had a fashion of calling everything "odd" that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of "oddities."..."The fact is, the business is *very* simple indeed, ... but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*."

"Simple and odd," said Dupin. ... "perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault."

"What nonsense *do* you talk!" replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

"Perhaps the mistery is a little too plain," said Dupin.

"Oh, good heavens! Who ever heard of such an idea?"

"A little *too* self-evident."

"Ha! ha! ha! – ha! ha! ha! – ho! ho! ho!" roared [the Prefect], profoundly amused, "Oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!"[260]

This first exchange between the Prefect of Paris and Detective Dupin culminates in laughter. Noting that the laughter is related to, or rather elicited by, Dupin's *oddness* is one of the merits of Cavell's reading. What makes Dupin *odd* in the eyes of the Prefect are his notions. The first is that a case requiring reflection "should be examined in the dark". The second is that, perhaps, it is "the very simplicity of the thing that puts the minister at fault". Moreover, we can see that, thirdly, it is Dupin's very *insistence* on these two notions that causes the Prefect to erupt into a great laugh. The narrator, speaking of the Prefect, had commented: "The Prefect had a fashion of calling every thing 'odd' that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of 'oddities'". By living the life he lives — "amid an absolute legion of oddities" — therefore, the Prefect is exposed to countless opportunities to laugh.

We can well understand how such a kind of laughter, a constant, *nervous laughter*, can stifle from the outset any attempt at understanding and listening. It is this inhibitory laughter that interests Cavell and that might keep philosophical writers from pursuing leads that seem ridiculous to them. Something that can seem ridiculous to some philosophers is a careful, and playful, attention to the language with which certain things are said. In *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994) Cavell talks about this reaction he calls "nervous laughter",[261] a reaction that comes naturally to some types of philosophers when one starts to speculate, *to play*, with certain aspects of philosophical writing; like, for instance, when one takes into account some of the metaphors philosophers use. One

---

[260] *In Quest of the Ordinary*, *cit.*, p. 164.

[261] *A Pitch of Philosophy*, *cit.*, p. 14.

example out of many is the image of the spade in *Philosophical Investigations*. Cavell asks (and I paraphrase): Does it make sense to dwell on reading this image? Does it make sense to ask whether what Wittgenstein has in mind is a civilization that does not force its way through, that does not apply a bomb where the ground does not allow for digging? We could, however, deepen this image still further, even in the opposite sense, and ask: wouldn't it then be a civilization that never progresses, one that doesn't keep digging when it encounters bedrock — a civilization that would never have discovered oil? If, for fear of looking ridiculous, we hold back these questions, we foreclose the possibility of unearthing something interesting, original, and new.

Now, the originality of Cavell's reading of *The Purloined Letter* lies not only in having identified the importance of the *odd* in this first scene. It lies in having caught the repetition of the word *odd* in the context of the game of *odd and even* that Dupin recounts when he wants to explain how he came to trace the letter. Odd and even are the two possibilities of a child's game, in which one of the two must keep one's hand closed, and the other guesses if the number of objects in the hand is indeed odd or even. (Dupin recounts being instructed in it by an eight-year-old champion.) In Cavell's view, Lacan's reading did not capture the importance of the repetition of this same word, *odd*, first in the context of the laughter it elicits, and second as one of two possibilities in the mind-reading game. What Lacan has grasped, however, and that "is fruitful", Cavell writes, is the repetition of two triangular structures within Poe's tale. They were well represented in Shoshana Felman's essay, *On Reading Poetry*, and they are reported here:

(Not seeing)		(Not seeing)	
KING		POLICE	
SCENE 1		SCENE 2	
QUEEN	MINISTER	MINISTER	DUPIN
(Sees that	(Sees the letter)	(Sees that	(Sees the letter)
the other doesn't see)		the other doesn't see)	

The recounting of these two structures is given by Cavell in the passage in which he dwells — plunging into *the obscurity of his own reflection* — on the thematization of the game of *odd and even* related to mind reading:

We should ... note that in the second interview (in which Dupin robs the robber) the third party of the triangle (the Police) is present only by implication (Dupin and the Minister are fictionally alone); and then note further that another party is equally present there, specifically present (only) by implication, namely the reader, myself, to whom the fictional letter is also invisible. So I am to that extent both the King and the Police of Poe's letter(s). But since I am (whoever I am) after all shown the contents of the literal thing called "The Purloined Letter" (that is, Poe's tale), since they are indeed, or in art, meant for me, as it were privately, I am the Queen from whom it is stolen, as well as the pair of thieves who remove it and return it, therapeutically, to me (for who else but myself could have stolen *this* from myself?). And if I am to read the mind of the one whose hand it is in (that is, mine, so my mind) but also the mind going with the hand it is written in (that is, the author's — but which one, that of the literal "Letter" or that of the fictional letter?), *it is also to be read as the work of one who opposes me, challenges me to guess whether each of its events is odd or even, everyday or remarkable, ordinary or out of the ordinary.*[262]

The game of *odd or even* is thus read by Cavell as an explanation of where the reader stands in relation to the letter of the text. By questioning it, the reader tries to guess whether what the text conceals is odd or even, everyday or remarkable, ordinary or out of the ordinary. The reading of other minds — here allegorized by the reading of the opponents' hands — takes place in a context of challenge and opposition. There is a need to interact with the text in front of us, to be up to the traps it sets for us. This way in which Cavell, by reading Poe, rewrites the approach to reading other minds is entirely innovative. The possibilities opened up by this approach are possibilities for *reading anything*: literary texts, philosophical texts, films, other people, oneself.

Cavell's Metaphilosophy: Reading the Unreadable

We are therefore back to the beginning. This is the method Cavell uses when he visits the various communities for whom he is *an Other*. His position is analogous to that of an outsider, an other, in the human sense of the term: *the sense for which every human being is other to every human being*. And — as Cavell is interested in highlighting — in every human encounter there is the possibility of being struck by a very particular, idiosyncratic aspect, unreadable or invisible to yet another human being. It is in this sense that Cavell approvingly quotes Felman's commentary of Lacan's

---

[262] Emphasis added. *In Quest of the Ordinary*, *cit.*, p. 168.

psychoanalytic reading of *The Purloined Letter*, which she calls — with a slogan, no doubt — "reading the unreadable".[263]

In what sense does humanistic research of the kind Cavell is interested in take the form of *reading the unreadable*? In the sense that, on paper, there is no particular connection that is before the eyes of everyone. And this fact highlights a great similarity with Wittgenstein: all the elements are in everyone's sight; but the singular path that leads to connect them is not. What Wittgenstein calls "a perspicuous presentation" (*Übersichtliche Darstellung*)[264] is not in everyone's sight, but is reached by everyone in his or her own way. The Prefect's mistake consists precisely in his blindness to the need for this perspicuous presentation, to which he prefers a technical, too close, and not very *übersichtlich* investigation. Any author, as well as any person, is not going to play odd or even with me by holding their hand completely open. The opponent's hand is closed. But, questioning their intentions, betting with them that their bet will be *odd or even*, is an integral part of this reciprocal game of mind-reading. It is a potentially infinite game. In Wittgenstein's terms, *I stop doing philosophy whenever I want*. The heart of the matter, however, is: this game in which I challenge my opponents by trying to read into their text an *odd* (strange, remarkable) or *even* (ordinary, unremarkable) element may never start, never get going, if I behave like the Prefect and automatically regard every attempt I make as odd.

At this point, I think it makes sense for me to make a bet myself: I think it is remarkable — on Cavell's part — to have drawn philosophers' attention to these dynamics of reading texts and to the feeling of offense (or "nervous laughter") that is provoked whenever we try to make our bet. There is no predictable way in which the game between reader and writer will take a turn. The very fact of interrogating it in that way, at those specific points, may cause the writer's text to reveal something unexpected to the reader (which only became visible when it was interrogated like *that*, in that specific way). It is at this level that it becomes significant that *The Purloined Letter* has been read by Lacan as an allegory of psychoanalysis and, at the same time, by Cavell as an allegory of philosophy. For just as the relationship that is established between analyst and patient is wholly particular, unpredictable to an outside eye, so too the relationship that Cavell hopes for between author and

---

[263] S. Felman, "On Reading Poetry. Reflections of the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytic Approaches", in *The Purloined Poe*, *cit.*, 133–156.

[264] *Philosophical Investigations*, *cit.*, §122.

reader in philosophy is highly personal, dependent on the way in which the two texts (of the writer and the reader) will interact with each other.

But, then, one might still ask: Isn't this image of philosophy proposed by Cavell too vague? We started with the review in which Cavell was said to be "too literary for some philosophers' tastes", and now we find that the whole methodology that Cavell intends to recommend is that a particular, strange, relationship be established between author and reader, analogous to the relationship between analyst and patient.

Let us then try and deepen one more time the sense of this analogy between philosophy, psychoanalysis and their relation to *The Purloined Letter*. Thinking that philosophy and psychoanalysis can be allegorized by the same short story tells us something interesting about the relevant structures and dynamics of both activities. In the case of psychoanalysis, there are patients who spontaneously turn to analysts. The latter will be able to analyze them only at the condition that the patients speak freely. In order to actually cure the symptoms, however, the analysts must put themselves into play; they are not inert; they have to provide responses to the words of the patients. In this reciprocal relation, both are reading each other — but there would be no game without the words and the needs of the patients. In the case of philosophy, there are problems who knock at the human doors. The philosophers answer. They interrogate the problems (and the texts in which they are embedded) trying to understand not only how things are in the texts, but also trying to understand themselves in relation to them. In this scenario, the texts that philosophers encounter can assume the role of the analysts, by giving them words they can respond to. Again, both sides are not inert and the letter of the texts changes when one interrogates it in a certain way; just as the philosophers change through one's interrogation.

Returning to Poe's story: the starting point, there, is a sensitive letter that has been purloined. The Queen calls the Prefect, the Prefect in turn calls Dupin. To find and purloin the letter again, Dupin interrogates his own position in relation to the Minister. Is Dupin the patient in this scheme? Or is he the analyst? He is the analyst, in so far as he responds to the others words (like the words of the Prefect); while the patient, in this story, is represented by the Queen who represses her voice and desire in front of the King (allegory of the superego); and, because of this suppression, sees her letter being purloined by Minister who keeps her hostage by hiding the letter (as the Queen herself did) in plain sight.

Some types of philosophers might perceive the care and the detail involved in these parallelisms as too complex, or too daunting. In this sense, they would perceive them as rather the opposite of a playful approach. But we already saw how playfulness can go along with freedom and exploration. By tying these aspects together in a single knot, Cavell is asking the reader to explore one's own richness — as he happened to explore, by forging these very connections, his own. In a nutshell: Cavell's way of interacting with texts is, practically always, *to put himself in the game*. To think that there is a standard way of interacting with texts (whether films, literary texts, philosophical texts, or other people) is precisely what Cavell intends to avoid. The lack of a standardized measure of reading, and the need to get into the particular, every single time, therefore also explains the thinness — and the playfulness — of this metaphilosophical principle of Cavell's. On a purely metaphilosophical level, in fact, Cavell recommends something very simple: *interact with care, bringing yourself into play, with the text before you*. Even Lacan doesn't recommend much more, on this abstract and general level, for the relationship between analyst and patient.

The beauty, however, is that precisely because no other vetoes are placed at this level, the philosophers who embrace their outsiderness to others, their oddness (as well as the patients who identify with their symptoms, which are themselves outsiders and odd), will be free to play with one's own and with the other's language and to set out in quest of the ordinary — a quest that is both simple and odd.

4.2 A Maverick Analytical Philosopher. Williams reads *Rameau's Nephew*

Introduction

In Bernard Williams's last book published during his lifetime, *Truth and Truthfulness. An Essay in Genealogy* (2002), one finds an original reading of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. Williams writes: "*Rameau's nephew* is a text that each reader has to process for himself or herself. That this should be so is entirely true to it. One thing that we can do with it is to turn it to the interests of philosophy, and there are no doubt many ways of doing that".[265] Williams's interest in *Truth and Truthfulness* consists in describing, on the basis of Diderot's text, a certain image of authenticity and in contrasting this image with another, Rousseau's, which is configured as an alternative and competing one; Williams's purpose in drawing this contrast is to show the greater realism of Diderot's option, along with the dangers and fantasies of Rousseau's option.

To cut a long story short, these are two images of authentic life that arose more or less at the same time, during the Enlightenment, and with which modernity has come to terms, and continues to come to terms. The Rousseauian conception,[266] according to Williams, carries with it a series of implausible assumptions about the transparency of the human mind, but above all about the idea of an authentic relationship with ourselves, which according to Rousseau can only be achieved in the intimate and private sphere. Whereas the Diderotian conception implies a view of the mind as opaque, ambiguous and disordered, and leaves open the question of how this type of mind can be made stable and reliable through interactions with other people and society (once the Rousseauian attempt to know oneself only through oneself has been accepted as hopeless). Now, although Williams is primarily interested, in *Truth and Truthfulness*, in the description of the idea of authenticity that finds expression in the pages of *Rameau's Nephew*, he also admits that "there are many ways to turn this text to the interests of philosophy". Some of these ways are only hinted at by

---

[265] *Truth and Truthfulness*, *cit.*, p. 188.

[266] Williams acknowledges his debt to, among others, Jean Starobinski's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l'obstacle* (1957), and to Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), for helping him grew interest in and making sense of the Rousseauian conception of the self. Moreover, it might be worth it to give the references of the sections of *Sincerity and Authenticity* where Trilling directly addresses Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, which are a valuable source for Williams's interpretation. See L. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1972. pp. 26–52.

Williams in the pages of *Truth and Truthfulness*. This section will consider and explore several of these hints, and use them to describe the image — or rather, the type — of philosopher that Bernard Williams embodied throughout his work.

In the section of *Truth and Truthfulness* called "*Diderot and* Rameau's Nephew",[267] Williams intends to bring back to life (or bring to life for the first time really) a philosophical discussion of this text. A first famous philosophical commentary was Hegel's in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, although here Diderot was not explicitly quoted, but excerpts from his work were taken up and commented on very briefly. The way Hegel read *Rameau's Nephew* was certainly bent to his philosophical purposes, which prevented him from appreciating certain aspects of the text that seemed significant to Williams. To be able to understand Williams's own purposes (and to summarize, in short, Hegel's), therefore, we need to delve deeper into the plot and structure of Diderot's text.

First of all, *Rameau's Nephew* is a dialogue. Its protagonists, *Moi* and *Lui*, meet in the gardens of the *Palais Royal* in Paris and spend half an hour together, conversing on many topics, such as the relationship between virtue and happiness, education, the possibility of an aesthetics of evil, what constitutes genius and artistic creation, or what distinguishes the philosopher from his fellow citizens. *Lui* is described by Diderot as (and this is the same characterisation also reported by Williams in *Truth and Truthfulness*): "one of the oddest characters in this land of ours where God has not been sparing them. He is a compound of high and low, good sense and insanity. The notion of what is decent and what is not must be strangely muddled in his head, for the good qualities nature has given him he displays without ostentation, and the bad ones without shame".[268]

What reason can one have to converse with such a figure? Undoubtedly, it attracts anyone interested in receiving a frank and honest account of one's contemporaries (and one's interlocutor). Yet, at the same time, *Lui* is described by Diderot as a great liar. How is it possible that *Lui* lies as easily as he tells the truth? His mind, as Williams writes, is disintegrated, he does not identify with either truth or falsehood, he is able to slip from one extreme to the other, with the same spontaneity but also with the same chaoticity. In a sense, it is always *Lui* — even if it is never, definitively, *Lui*. *Rameau's Nephew* thus stages a form of authenticity that is expressed through a spontaneous and

---

[267] *Truth and Truthfulness*, *cit.*, pp. 185–191.

[268] *Ivi*, *cit.*, pp. 186–187.

uninhibited attitude; but not only that, because one of the many themes of the work seems to be the following: the price to be paid for this kind of authenticity is dispersion or chaoticity. *Lui*, in fact, never becomes something (or someone) once and for all, but always remains iridescent and tremendously excitable, swayable. He acts and responds on a whim. Undoubtedly, this fact makes him capable of passing through a very rich variety of moods. And one cannot help but be admired by his ability (the same ability that Hegel also dwells on in the *Phenomenology*) "[of mixing together] thirty arias, Italian, French, tragic, comic, of every sort; now with a deep bass he descended into hell, then, contracting his throat, he rent the vaults of heaven with a falsetto tone, frantic and soothed, imperious and mocking, by turns".[269] His ability to master all these musical tones, from the highest to the lowest, with extreme virtuosity and intensity, gives us a further (musical) picture of the personality of Rameau's nephew. To paraphrase Whitman: if he always contradicts himself, it is because he is large, he contains multitudes. There is no self that is truly his: he is always himself, when he dances and jumps and goes mad, but also when, immediately afterwards, he becomes serious and melancholic; when he is penniless, after having spent everything on lunches, dinners and clothes, but also whenever he regains his (social and economic) fortune. Who would want, or even could want, to be constantly like *Lui*? Constantly split and disintegrated? Few, one would say. Were Hegel and Williams among these few? Certainly not. As Williams observes, Hegel seems to admire the personality of Rameau's nephew for very much his own reasons, which take him far away from the letter of the text. For Hegel, Rameau's nephew is a reflective character, typical and representative of the modern unhappy conscience, perpetually split and searching for an infinity it can never reach. Whereas *Moi*, his interlocutor, the philosopher, the one who urges him to speak and expound his extravagant and eccentric theses, represents for Hegel the conventional and unreflective morality.

Here, for Williams, we glimpse a first problem in Hegel's reading. The latter, in fact, places *Lui* in absolute contrast to *Moi*; moreover — and herein lies his second error — Hegel describes *Lui* as the more reflective of the two. These are two mistakes because, if one pays close attention to the text, one realizes how the conversation between the two is not one big (albeit half-hour-long) display of self on *Lui*'s part. *Moi* participates and is deeply involved in the discussion, himself opening up

---

[269] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 317–318.

many avenues later followed by *Lui*, or intervening and participating passionately (and not just with mere conventionality) in the dialogue. Thus, *Moi* and *Lui* are not so rigidly opposed and it is by no means true, Williams argues, that *Lui* is the more reflective of the two. On the contrary, following the course of the dialogue more closely one realizes that the opposite is true: "the crippling reflections" belong to Moi, while "Lui is to a significant degree more open and spontaneous".[270] Hegel was not interested in making these subtle distinctions because, as mentioned above, his aim was to use the two figures as moments in the development of Western consciousness. Williams therefore concludes that it was precisely this lack of attention and care that caused Hegel to lose sight of "some of the main ideas expressed in [Diderot's] text, and it is a loss that affects his own goal: such ideas", Williams adds, "could contribute to the understanding of the history of consciousness" itself.[271] What philosophical ideas are we talking about? Williams has in mind the ideas related to the possibility, and the actual realization, of a fruitful dialogue between opposing instances. They are those ideas related to "the sense of what it is for the narrator [that is, Moi] to be engaged with Rameau and to conspire with him in generating [the] conversation".[272]

I think we can learn a lot about the kind of philosopher Williams tried to be if we interrogate these ideas. That is, if we take a closer look at how he himself (similarly to the narrator of *Rameau's Nephew*) sought to enter into dialogue with instances opposite to his own, often in conflict and carrying a vision that was perhaps less reflective, more chaotic, but more open and spontaneous about the image and task of philosophy. In this sense, Williams's writing brought with it that compromise expressed between *Moi* and *Lui*. Let us see how.

Perry Anderson and Bernard Williams: "The Hatred of Philosophy" (1957)

On 6 November 1957, the 19-year-old Perry Anderson wrote an article called 'The Minstrels of M.I.5' in the Oxford student magazine *The Isis*.[273] It is a polemical article in which Anderson takes issue with the philosophers of Oxford and Cambridge. Bearing in mind Anderson's age at the time,

---

[270] *Truth and Truthfulness*, *cit.*, pp. 188–189.

[271] *Ivi*, *cit.*, p. 189.

[272] *Ibidem*.

[273] P. Anderson, "The Minstrels of M.I.5", *The Isis*, 6 November 1957, p. 18. All the following citations of Anderson's article are from the same page.

we can read it as the indictment of a disappointed student. But we can also read it, undoubtedly, as a rather crude Marxist critique.

The points of his indictment are as follows. First (though not in order of appearance in the article), he imputes a form of xenophobia to these philosophers. He reproaches them for not studying the works of non-English authors at all: for example, French philosophers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, or German philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. Secondly, he criticizes English academic philosophy for leaving the field open to authors who have "prostituted" themselves to culture, such as Colin Wilson; authors who, easily, and in order to profit from their philosophical-literary forays, deal with existential problems. English academic philosophy, according to Anderson, has in fact given up dealing with existential problems, leaving them at the mercy of other (in his opinion more shoddy) authors. Thirdly, a rather crude hypothesis is presented by Anderson as to why English academic philosophy is in such a bad way: dramatizing his diagnosis, he writes that the condition of current English academic philosophy depends, among other things, on the fact that, between Camus and Wittgenstein, these philosophers have chosen Wittgenstein's approach. It would be better to say: *Wittgenstein's linguistic approach*. For as long as English professional philosophy limits itself to analyzing language, for the young Anderson, it will never be able to criticize, or fight against, the dominant political system. On the contrary, this type of philosophy will only turn out to be the expression of bourgeois and capitalist ideology; or, as he writes, it will turn out to be "the inevitable expression of the ideology of the Welfare State"; that is, the expression of a reformism that never attempts to shake up, subvert or revolutionize the system in which it is rooted. For the young Anderson, the English academic philosopher, who, instead of dealing with existential problems, is concerned with examining language, is in fact silent on all the most important problems: such as, for example, those concerning power and its radical questioning. Lastly, Anderson's text is laden with a whole series of moral assessments of the character of English analytical philosophers: he regards them as privileged and opportunistic (because they take advantage of the system without ever criticizing it, and without removing the socio-economic barriers that prevent access); racist (as already mentioned: because they despise other cultures and other countries, and only read each other); cowardly and fearful (because instead of addressing ethical-political issues head-on, e.g. by descending into politics, and participating in extreme and subversive movements, as was the experience of the Resistance in France, they limit

themselves to dealing with linguistic problems and to the struggle, to Camus's *Man in Revolt*, they prefer "a cozy existence", Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, which one can safely conduct on one's couch).

On 4 December 1957, the 28-year-old Bernard Williams responded with an article called "The Hatred of Philosophy".[274] "There are various ways of hating philosophy", Williams begins. For him, one can hate academic philosophy for being academic, or linguistic philosophy for being linguistic, or English philosophy for being English. After making these distinctions, comes Williams's first jibe at Anderson, which is delivered hypothetically and indirectly: "If you are a philosophy-hater, make up your mind which sort you are — especially if you are going to make loud noises about it. Otherwise the loud noises will only deafen you".

Interestingly, the construction of Williams's response is stylistically marked in terms of rhetoric. Williams shows that he is unsure of the direction of Anderson's hatred, and poses a series of questions: what does Anderson hate? Perhaps the "linguistic temperament of English philosophy"? But in asking this question, Williams makes a first distinction, again proposed in an interrogative form: what is Anderson referring to when he speaks of English philosophy? Even to America and Australia? Is he so sure that even in Australia the social background of professional philosophers is always "upper-middle class"? Furthermore, Williams points out that Anderson, at times, seems to rail against any kind of philosophy that does not express an "existential attitude", raising authors such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as heroes of his own vision of philosophy. But, as Williams observes, someone like Kierkegaard thought that nothing important could come out of any kind of research by professional philosophers; and if Anderson thinks like Kierkegaard, then would he want to throw away or ignore the work of philosophers like Hegel and Merleau-Ponty?

At this point, Williams expresses the doubt that perhaps Anderson hates philosophy as such: philosophy whose primary purpose is to understand the world rather than to change it (this is the sense in which Marx spoke of the 'poverty of philosophy'). And then he adds: "I seem to see the metaphysics of 'class ideology' peeping rather coyly through the holes in Anderson's argument". If

---

[274] B. Williams, "The Hatred of Philosophy", *The Isis*, 4 December 1957, p. 20. All the following citations of Williams's article are from the same page.

Anderson were more explicit in his accusations and especially in their content, perhaps the philosophers he attacks might have something to say about it, "something to the point".

Finally, Williams makes a concession to Anderson. Perhaps Anderson just hates *smug* philosophy. "If so, I am with him", Williams replies. And, on this last point, he adds two more things: one, the fact that some of Oxbridge's philosophers are smug says little about the content of their philosophy (and here it comes to mind that Williams is referring to Austin, whose character and manner of posturing he disliked, but whose premises and consequences of his philosophical approach he admired); two, there are many ways of being smug and, Williams concludes, one of them is that of "the revolutionary ideologue, the justified sinner, assured of history on his side". This human type carries with it, he writes, "the smugness of hatred": "the feeling that so long as the springs of indignation freely bubble, I am all right, a free man, assured arbiter of whether what I say is true or false, coherent or incoherent, sense or nonsense. Of these, too, philosophy [as Williams conceives it, it is implied] is the enemy".

What does this intervention by Williams express? First of all, Williams takes young Anderson's instances — the destructive and disruptive criticisms — seriously. He finds them confusing and chaotic, but no less worthy of examination and analysis. And like a good analytical philosopher, Williams *analyzes* them. But, on closer inspection, he does not limit himself to this: Williams is also attentive to the motivations, the motives, of Anderson's criticism. He is interested in what might motivate it, and identifies this motive in *hatred*. Not that there is anything moralistic about identifying this motive; on the contrary, when Williams speaks of Anderson's hatred of the smug attitude of certain English professional philosophy, he is keen to emphasize: "I am with him". He shares this hatred with him.

So, to summarize. Williams's first move: taking Anderson's critical and destructive instances seriously. Second move: identifying the motives of Anderson's speech. Third move: analyzing his speech; making distinctions; speculating what Anderson might mean by his colorful and heated expressions. Fourth move: using irony and sarcasm to dismantle some of Anderson's claims and assertions. Fifth move: reminding Anderson — and himself — that there is not only *the hatred of smugness*, but also *the smugness of hatred*: the claim to be infallible, to feel on the side of the righteous. Williams will say in an interview almost thirty years later that the best way to describe his

approach might be: *scepticism without reductionism*.[275] Here one can already see this tendency at work in the (almost) thirty-year-old Williams.

Moreover, Williams's response to Anderson is highly personal: he does not take the side of the analytical philosophers, he does not declare an affiliation; he simply starts from the words of his interlocutor and analyzes them. He practices and stages the virtues of analytical philosophy that he appreciates most (analyzing language, making distinctions); but there is also more: he expresses regret that Merleau-Ponty has not been translated into English (distancing himself from what Anderson had called the "xenophobia" or provincialism of English philosophy); he rejects a smug attitude, expresses curiosity (trying to investigate what Anderson might have meant, without taking it for granted), and imagination (in identifying his motives).

In short, he acts as an analytical philosopher, yes, but an atypical one. A maverick analytical philosopher: in that his response does not manifest any of Anderson's three accusations against the category, namely that it is too academic, too linguistic and too English. In fact, his response is formulated not in an academic tone, but conversational and informal; he does not dwell exclusively on Anderson's language, but is interested in what motivates the use of that language (in particular, the emotion of hatred); he rails against the provincialism and arrogance of his English academic colleagues (expressing interest in French philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, criticizing the self-satisfied pose of the English philosopher, or of the Englishman as a type of person). Finally, Williams's response also shows interest in 'existential questions', in the last line, when he expresses skepticism for the revolutionary type, and its supposed, justified innocence.

Roger Scruton and Bernard Williams: "On Hating and Despising Philosophy" (1996)

Almost thirty years later, in 1995, Williams receives another critique with potentially destructive and disruptive effects. This time the criticism is aimed directly at him and in particular at his collection of academic essays *Making Sense of Humanity*. The author of the critique is Roger Scruton, then in his early fifties and already an established conservative cultural critic and pen of *The Times*. Scruton, like Anderson (almost) thirty years earlier, reproaches analytical philosophy for providing little help in dealing with "the moral marass which surrounds" philosophers and, more

---

[275] B. Williams, "An Interview with Bernard Williams", *Cogito*, 8, 1, 1994, 3–19.

generally, all of us.[276] Thus, in the 1990s as well as in the 1950s, the same criticism is again levelled at English professional philosophy: namely, that of not dealing with 'existential questions'. Or rather: this point in Scruton's critique coincides with a point in Anderson's critique.

With one fundamental difference, however. Anderson did not only reproach analytical philosophy for not dealing with existential problems; he also reproached it for leaving the occupation of the public arena to others, "the prostitutes" of culture (as he called them), who share an attitude that is easily profound, spiritual and accessible, but above all not critical enough (for example, the attitude of public figures such as Colin Wilson).[277] Anderson's positive models are instead the French public philosophers such as Camus, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. And for Scruton? For Scruton, we can assume that the model is himself. In fact, a few years later Scruton will publish a book like *An Intelligent Guide to Modern Culture* (1998)[278], whose aim (as stated by the title, bordering on the didactic) is precisely to provide a guide to the intelligent person and not only to the scholar of philosophy. And it is precisely to this common reader ("the lay reader") that Scruton appeals in his brief review of Williams's *Making Sense of Humanity*.

Scruton writes that there are two senses in which Williams does not make many concessions to this type of reader. In one sense, because Williams remains too technical, too academic, too 'professorial'. Scruton uses the image of the analytical laboratory: he argues that Williams, in his academic essays, puts his head outside that laboratory too little. Too little to be of any help to the ordinary reader. In a second sense, because, according to Scruton, Williams writes as if "academic life, the university, the curriculum, the intellectual agenda" are the same as they were in the 1950s. That is: for Scruton, Williams is out of touch with the problems that afflict the ordinary citizen at the turn of the century. And, again for Scruton (and here we glimpse his concerns as a conservative), these problems are: "the definitive secularisation of European society, the fall of modernism, the emergence of a 'value free' culture". In the face of these current, pressing problems, "the clever logic chopping of the Oxford Professor looks faintly ridiculous". Again, therefore, as in the case of Anderson, some shoddy aspects of the character of the professional philosopher (who is presented

---

[276] R. Scruton, "Ethics for the Amoral", *The Times*, September 21, 1995.

[277] More on the figure of Colin Wilson in J. Rée, "English Philosophy in the Fifties", *Radical Philosophy*, 65, 1993, 3–21.

[278] R. Scruton, *An Intelligent Guide to Modern Culture*, London, Duckworth, 1998.

here as a dullard, skilled in his laboratory, but ridiculous to any ordinary person) are highlighted. Scruton's article closes with an invitation to Williams to finally question, in his writing, the cultural status of philosophy in the contemporary world.

Williams's response was not long in coming. On 18 April 1996, he published an article in the *London Review of Books* called "On Hating and Despising Philosophy".[279] As in the case of the reply to Anderson, Williams takes the opportunity to conduct a more general discourse. The first interesting element is that this response bears almost the same title. *Almost*. It is as if Williams is elaborating on an insight he had in 1957 and then matured over the next thirty years.

Faced with Scruton's attacks on his professional persona, which was too academic and 'professorial', Williams takes it very far. He mentions three possible types of philosophers (neither of which is the type he favors): the Socratic type, a martyr of freethinking, who is not accepted by his contemporary conformist and conventional people; the Australian professional philosopher, who could be regarded as Australian politicians are regarded by their countrymen, i.e. as a "night-soil worker"; the figure of the lawyer in the United States of America, typically regarded as "powerful, ubiquitous and horrible".[280]

These figures can be hated for different reasons. Socrates's fellow citizens could hate his destabilizing influence on Athenian society; American lawyers can be hated because of their power, and the unscrupulous way in which they use it; finally, towards certain types of philosophers, such as the caricature of the Australian philosopher (or rather: the caricature of how ordinary people in Australia view their professional philosophers) to speak of hatred is even too strong. Disinterest would be the more appropriate word.

Yet, there is what Williams here calls "despising", that is directed against those figures we not only hate because of how they behave; we hate them because we know there would be a better way, and inherent in their position and role, in which they should behave. For example, some may not only hate philosophy as Socrates's fellow citizens may have hated it (after all, they hated it because it took away their useful certainties, without providing other, equally solid, ones in return). But they may hate it as those who feel betrayed by a reference figure: 'you, as a parent, should not behave like this'; 'you, as a teacher, should not behave like this'; 'you, as a philosopher, should not behave like this'.

---

[279] *Essays and Reviews, cit.*, pp. 363–370. See *infra* p. 117.

[280] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 363.

Yes, *but like what*? Scruton's accusation was: losing yourself in academic, 'professorial' exercises, losing sight of more pressing human problems. Anderson's accusation, thirty years earlier, had been (if we want to put it in an extremely condensed way): losing yourself in a meticulous analysis of language, and never questioning the privileged academic position from which you derive, from which you express your smugness and ill-concealed xenophobia.

To these three types, quickly sketched out, Williams adds a fourth. The type of philosopher represented by Plato. Plato is chosen by Williams for two, interconnected reasons: he represents the hero of those who cherish "the human importance of philosophy" and a style of philosophy that "speaks (rightly or wrongly) directly to our most basic concerns";[281] but, at the same time, his philosophy is also very technical and very difficult, and even in his time, as Williams writes, there was no shortage of those who "complained that philosophy was becoming technical and inaccessible".[282] This is the ideal of philosophy that is favored by Williams. That of a philosophy that manages to be, at the same time, "thoroughly truthful and honestly helpful".[283] The fact is that such a philosophy will also be, at the same time, tremendously difficult. And exercises that may be seen as unnecessarily technical, or inaccessible, are an integral part of philosophy as a discipline.

Having reached this point in the argument, however, the problems are far from over — indeed, they have only just begun. This is because Williams admits that a certain routine way of carrying out these exercises, and of sharpening one's technique, can distance one from the importance of those human problems that constituted the heart of Platonic research. But this does not mean, for Williams, that the institutional, and professional, structure of philosophy as a discipline must be rejected in its entirety. It will only mean that, in contemporary times, and with the ever-increasing professionalization of philosophy, the philosopher must be able to be veridical without losing himself in technicalities as an end in themselves.

The extreme alternative to technicality, Williams adds, is *kitsch*: the immediate, and even rather self-satisfied, reference to problems deemed intense, profound and urgent.[284] As if assuming this posture were sufficient to address them in the most honest and truthful way possible. Therefore,

---

[281] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 365.

[282] *Ibidem*.

[283] *Essays and Reviews, cit.*, p. 370.

[284] *Ivi, cit.*, p. 369.

faced with Anderson and Scruton, who criticize academic philosophy in the name of its lack of reference to human problems, but who, in their criticism, simplify, exaggerate and dramatize, Williams replies that, in addition to intensity, there is a need for real discipline.

Moi and *Lui*

One way to discipline one's thinking, in contemporary times, is that provided by the teaching of philosophy. By learning to discuss, distinguish and analyze, philosophers will primarily be interested in understanding. By understanding the phenomena they analyze, then, it is possible that they will also prove to be useful to their contemporaries. I think this priority of understanding,[285] in Williams, is well seen in his interaction with Anderson and Scruton.

Both pose a challenge to the reflexive and institutional person (an analogue of *Moi*) with their heated, passionate and chaotic critiques and appeals (analogues of *Lui*'s personality). And the kind of philosopher that Williams embodied was built by taking these complaints seriously: responding to them, and entering into dialectical relations with them.

Williams's philosophy can thus best be described as a condensation of the interaction between *Moi* and *Lui*. Neither pole is complete without the other. And Williams himself (although acting, in his professional work, more in the style of *Moi*) reaches heights of expressiveness that he could never have achieved without interaction with figures similar to *Lui*.

Recall that for Williams, in reading *Rameau's Nephew*, it was important "to be aware of what it means for the narrator, *Moi*, to engage with Rameau and conspire with him in producing the conversation". Good. I think it is equally important, reading Williams, to be aware of what it means for him to engage with Rameau's like (destructive, chaotic, disruptive) criticisms and to conspire with them in producing the conversation. Famous, and also of multiple possible interpretations, is Williams's observation that his philosophical views are held together like 'conspirators'.[286] What if these conspirators were all the (also critical, destructive and disruptive) figures with whom Williams conspired for an "entirely truthful and honestly helpful" philosophy?

---

[285] See *infra* p. 166.

[286] *World, Mind, and Ethics, cit.*, p. 186.

5. Chapter Five: Two Quantitative Studies

5.1 Doing Philosophy as Opening Parentheses: Quantifying the Use of Parentheses in Stanley Cavell's Style

Introduction

Let us begin (one more time) with a platitude: whatever philosophy is, it is *also* some kind of literature, and one can legitimately study some literary aspects of the philosophers' style — like their use of lexicon or syntax; footnotes or parentheses. In the field of literary studies, it is a common practice to use quantitative methods to study the stylistic aspects of the authors under examination. And in both fields — philosophy and literature — what is initially considered a misplaced effort can become illuminating thanks to the results achieved and to their interpretations.

This section will provide two major sections of results, together with my own interpretations of them; going through these pages, one could see for oneself if my efforts were rewarding or misplaced. What is more, the upshot of a quantitative approach (which, under the influence of Franco Moretti, I label as *distant reading*)[287] is that a great part of the effort is sustained by the calculations performed by computers. However, this fact does not assure that the results will ultimately be interesting, because an interpretative effort must always be done to let the data speak interestingly.

---

[287] Of course, I have in mind the approach outlined by Franco Moretti in *Distant Reading* (2013), which is an approach that can also be adopted without the help of the computer. Moretti was my primary source of inspiration, therefore I will use the label 'distant reading'. Nevertheless, I have in mind various types of similar approaches that fall within the wider label of 'digital humanities' and, generally speaking, quantitative methods in humanities. Here you find a list of people who have already done such works in the history of philosophy and in the history of ideas: Betti and van den Berg (2014), Betti and van den Berg (2016), Betti et al. (2019), De Bolla et al. (2020), Bonino and Tripodi (2019), Bonino, Maffezioli, and Tripodi (2020), Malaterre, Chartier, and Pulizzotto (2019), Petrovich (2018) and Petrovich and Buonomo (2018). In this context, it is worth reminding that both stylistics and digital humanities have long histories. For instance, in 1940s, Josephine Miles was counting adjectives in Romantic poets, and people like Robert Cluett were already computing sentence lengths and punctuation marks in Hemingway and other modern writers in the 1980s and 1990s. A key early text is also Burrows's *Computation into Criticism* (1987). Stylistics is also known as 'authorship attribution' in some contexts; this also has a long history overlapping with corpus and forensic linguistics. In the 1990s and 2000s, stylistics was famously critiqued by authors like Stanley Fish. I hope that the interpretations and data allow the present section to disprove Fish's and others' skepticism about these methods. (In order not to burden an already lengthy note, I have included only the date of the quoted contributions. See the final bibliography for more detailed references.)

I choose a distant reading approach because it is able to measure the most evident stylistic recurrences in a certain corpus. In Cavell, the use of parentheses is immediately striking, but it can be even more striking if one interrogates his texts quantitatively, measuring exactly how many parentheses are used, and how.[288] Thus distant reading seems like an adequate candidate for making sense, not just contextually, but globally, of an author's use of certain stylistic devices.

I speak of a more global or comprehensive view because distant reading — as is well known among those who practice it — is very often able to make up for a job that would be very difficult to do *manually* (e.g. counting thoroughly the number of words in every parenthesis of every single text in a corpus), and which is often conducted *intuitively* ('I see that there are many words in parentheses in these pages; parentheses *must* occur quite often in the whole corpus').

What is more, thanks to distant reading we are able to transform into space what — with just a close reading — we would experience in terms of time. (A methodological feature that shows not only the potential but also the limitations of this approach.) In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell writes that "what makes a statement or a question profound is not its placing, but its timing".[289] By not taking into account the lived and temporal aspect of reading, and focusing only on its quantification and spatialization, distant reading is unable to aim at the kind of depth that Cavell has in mind. However, I believe that it can still offer us comprehensiveness and visual clarity — through the help of graphs, charts and tables.

But let us go back from speculations to impressions. An impression one gets when reading Cavell, even at a very first reading, is that there are a lot of parentheses. What happens when one tries to verify this fact? Is Cavell's use really so great? Or is it just an impression? These were my guiding questions. And certainly I would not have gone very far (always in terms of *visual clarity*, mind you: there are excellent speculations on Cavell's use of parentheses, among others by Mahon and

---

[288] In the literary studies something similar has been done (on parentheses, I mean, not just in general as indicated in footnote 287). For instance, it can be cited here N. Scaffai, *L'uso (in un certo modo) della parentesi. Su una costante di Caproni*, in *Giorgio Caproni. Lingua, stile, figure*, a cura di Davide Colussi – Paolo Zublena, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2014, 113–36.

[289] In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell also writes that a stylistic habit of his are "dots of suspension … dashes before the sentences … and parentheses" — and the use of parentheses, according to him, is due to the "visual clarity" they possess. *Must We Mean What We Say?*, *cit.*, p. xii.

Jackson)[290] without a methodology like the distant reading.

Quantitative methods will allow us, both in this section and in the next, to delve into the types of philosophers embodied by Cavell and Williams. Placing many parentheses in a philosophical text seems to go in the direction of the psychological insight that Cavell is interested in, and which we have seen in action in all four chapters devoted to him. Here, thanks to quantitative measurement, we will be able to observe whether, and how much, this psychological deepening (given by the increase of parentheses and of voices within parentheses) is peculiar to Cavell himself, whether, and to what extent, it is shared by other philosophers, and how this aspect of his philosophical style unfolds in his entire oeuvre.

Materials and Methods[291]

To highlight the exceptionality of Cavell's use of parentheses, I chose a comparative approach: I defined some measures to describe the quantity (length, number) and the quality (semantics) of the content of the parentheses; then I applied these measures to Cavell's books and to the books of other authors from 20th century analytical philosophy (a tradition Cavell wanted *to provoke* but never *to leave*; he rather wanted to make analytical philosophers hear his dissident voice). To perform machine-driven analysis on the books, I needed to digitalize, process (OCR-based text acquisition) and review the chosen books.

The Construction of the Corpus

Out of the 18 books published by Cavell, I chose to include only 15. The three remaining books [*Disowning Knowledge* (2008), *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (2003), *Cavell on Film* (2005a)]

---

[290] Á. Mahon, "'This is Said on Tiptoe': Stanley Cavell and the Writing of Philosophy", *IJAS Online*, 3, 2014, 23–33; L. Jackson, "A Different Path: Why Stanley Cavell Won't Get to the Point", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 29 (4), 2015, 503–521.

[291] In "Material and Methods", "The Construction of the Corpus", "Acquisition and Pre-Processing" and "Measurements" I profited from the technical work of Michele Ciruzzi, who has performed an image-to-text (OCR) elaboration of the corpus, converted the ebooks to plain text with ASCII encoding, and processed each file using a regular expression search. Moreover, he also collaborated with me in defining the statistical measures for describing both the quantity and the quality of the content of the parentheses, and in applying them to the corpus.

were excluded because the majority of each text is comprised of works already published in the other books. Then, I included only three chapters of *Philosophical Passages*, those written by Cavell (and not the ones written by other authors or the interviews with Cavell). For three books (*The World Viewed*, *The Senses of Walden*, *The Claim of Reason*), I considered both the whole book at once and the parts of the books published in different editions. For *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden*, the publication of the second edition of both books brought with it new appendices, which I took into account separately from the original books. For *The Claim of Reason*, there are accounts made by Cavell himself in his autobiography that the fourth part (occupying 45 percent of the whole book) was written after the years 1975–1976; therefore, I considered this part separately from the first three parts (which were written between 1955 and 1971). The list of books is to be found in Table 1. I chose to consider only the books written by Cavell and not his short essays because the majority of them were included, and even revised, in his books. In a further work, it would be possible to compare, with the very same measures defined here, the style of the essays as published in journals and as chapters in books.

Then, I defined three control groups to compare to Cavell: two authors which were important in his formation (which we can label as 'masters'), nine authors who can be considered, alongside Cavell, as anti-theoretical moral philosophers and 12 other analytical authors from the second half of the twentieth century.

For the first group, I selected Wittgenstein and Austin, who, in the Foreword to *The Claim of Reason*, are presented as philosophers 'who opened a path' that Cavell himself is trying to follow.[292] For the second group, I selected Anscombe, Baier, Diamond, Foot, MacIntyre, McDowell, Murdoch, Williams and Winch. These are the philosophers Cavell cites in the Foreword to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* because he thinks they share with him an anti-theoretical spirit in moral philosophy; therefore, they are thought of by Cavell as being in line with the perfectionist route for philosophical writing that he sketches in that book.[293] Finally, the third group is composed of 12 analytical authors who happen to be the most cited in five representative philosophy journals (*The Philosophical Review*, *Noûs*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Mind* and *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*) in the period from 1985 to 2015 (Petrovich

---

[292] *The Claim of Reason*, *cit.*, p. xviii.

[293] See *infra* p. 45.

and Buonomo, 2018). Then, for each of the three groups of authors, I selected the most cited book (or paper if there are not any books available) on Google Scholar. These texts are listed in Table 2.

Table 1. List of Cavell's books considered.

Title	First and enlarged editions	Used edition
Must We Mean What We Say?	1969	1976
The World Viewed	1971, 1979	1979
The Claim of Reason	1979	1999
The Senses of Walden	1972, 1981	1992
Pursuits of Happiness	1981	1981
Themes Out of School	1984	1988b
In Quest of the Ordinary	1988	1988a
This New Yet Unapproachable America	1989	2013
Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome	1990	1990
A Pitch of Philosophy	1994	1994
Philosophical Passages	1995	1995
Contesting Tears	1996	1997
Cities of Words	2004	2005b
Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow	2005	2005c
Little Did I Know	2010	2010

Table 2. List of benchmark books considered.

Author	Title	Category
Cavell	*The Claim of Reason*	Cavell
Austin	*How to Do Things with Words*	Master
Wittgenstein	*Philosophical Investigations*	Master
Burge	*Origins of Objectivity*	Most cited
Davidson	*Essays on Actions and Events*	Most cited
Dummett	*Frege*	Most cited
Fodor	*The Modularity of Mind*	Most cited
Frege	'Sense and Reference'	Most cited

Kripke	*Naming and Necessity*	Most cited
Lewis	*Convention*	Most cited
Putnam	*Reason, Truth and History*	Most cited
Quine	*Word and Object*	Most cited
Russell	*A History of Western Philosophy*	Most cited
Williamson	*Knowledge and its Limits*	Most cited
Wright	*Truth and Objectivity*	Most cited
Anscombe	*Intention*	Anti-theoretical
Baier	*A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*	Anti-theoretical
Diamond	*The Realistic Spirit*	Anti-theoretical
Foot	*Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*	Anti-theoretical
MacIntyre	*After Virtue*	Anti-theoretical
McDowell	*Mind and World*	Anti-theoretical
Murdoch	*The Sovereignty of Good*	Anti-theoretical
Williams	*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*	Anti-theoretical
Winch	*The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*	Anti-theoretical

Acquisition and Pre-processing

Each book or paper was collected as an ebook, where available, or as a scanned file. Successively, an image-to-text (OCR) elaboration of the scanned files was performed and the ebooks were converted to plain text with ASCII encoding, which includes only numbers, the 26 letters of the alphabet (without accents or other modifications) and punctuation. Then each file was processed to extract the sentences inside the parentheses (and particularly inside the parentheses after a mark) using a regular expression (*regex*) search.

During this phase, the files were checked for errors both automatically and manually to correctly extract as many of the parentheses as possible; all the typos in the text were not manually checked, which would have required a consistent amount of time without significantly improving the quality of the analysis. In fact, the measures compare the frequency of each word inside and outside the parentheses, and it was noted that if an OCR error occurs, it changes the word consistently in the text (i.e. the word is always (or at least often) wrong in the same way), preserving the comparison with itself.

It is not guaranteed that all the parentheses in the original text were caught, as some may be lost due to poor OCR processing. However, the number of lost parentheses is so small that it does not pose a challenge to the overall strength of the findings. Vice versa, it was manually checked that each recognized parentheses appears in the text. For this reason, the data must be considered as an underestimation of parentheses (in terms of count and content) rather than an overestimation. At the same time, some meaningless parentheses were automatically discarded, particularly those which contain only a single alphabetical character different from a and i, non-alphabetic characters or Roman numbers. Finally, the lowercased ASCII text and the content of the parentheses were tokenized (i.e. transformed in a list of words and punctuation marks, each of them individually referred to as a token), discarding all non-alphabetic characters except for ., ;? ! and all tokens composed of a single alphabetical character other than a and i.

Measurements

Since my aim is to investigate the use of parentheses in Cavell's books both quantitatively and qualitatively, some measures for each task were defined.

The quantitative investigation aims to assess if Cavell used more parentheses than a typical contemporary author, and therefore it was tried to measure the length and the frequency of the parentheses. It was chosen not to focus on the raw number of parentheses because the books in my sample are heterogeneous in their length, and so it is not meaningful comparing the raw number of parentheses in two books, if one is twice as long as the other. Moreover, the length of each parenthesis varies substantially among the authors, and I needed to distinguish an author who uses many very short (two or three words) parentheses from an author like Cavell, who uses many very long (even over one hundred words) parentheses.

The qualitative investigation aims to describe the role of parentheses in Cavell's style, and so it was tried to measure if and how the text inside the parentheses differs from the text outside the parentheses.

To assess the quantitative use of parentheses, some measures were defined:

1. text length = total number of tokens in the book

2. parentheses ratio = number of tokens inside parentheses / text length

3. dot parentheses ratio =

number of tokens inside a parentheses which begins immediately after a mark(.?!) / text length

The *dot parentheses ratio* measure was suggested by a close reading of Cavell's books, and it was identified in the early stages of the research as a possible marker of Cavell's exceptional use of parentheses. The *parentheses ratio* is computed using the number of tokens inside the parentheses (i.e. the sum of the lengths of the parentheses) rather than the absolute number: this allows me to highlight another distinctive trait of Cavell's style, immediately evident in a close reading. The absolute number of parentheses in *The Claim of Reason*, divided by the length of the book measured in tokens, is the second highest (0.0095) among the considered authors (the first one is Putnam's *Reason, Truth and History* (0.0105)). But at the same time, *The Claim of Reason* is the only book containing parentheses longer than 300 tokens (there are three parentheses longer than 400 tokens). *Parentheses ratio* and *dot parentheses ratio* were used to quantify how much greater the use of parentheses by Cavell is with respect to the use by other authors.

To assess the qualitative (semantic) use of parentheses, two other measures were defined, one which looks at each text all at once and one which looks at each single word in the text at a time:

1. The first measure is the Pearson's correlation coefficient r^2 between the frequency of each given word inside the parentheses (i.e. the fraction of the words which are the given one or equivalently the probability that a word randomly chosen is the given one) and in the whole text: it measures how much the content of parentheses represents (i.e. is semantically similar to) the whole text (1 means that the frequency of each word is identical inside the parentheses and in the whole text, while 0 means that the frequency of each word inside the parentheses is useless to predict the frequency of that word in the whole text).

2. The second measure is the result, as *p*-value, of a one-tailed binomial test on the frequency of each word inside the parentheses (in terms of number of occurrences of the chosen word and total number of tokens inside the parentheses), assuming as true frequency the frequency of the word in the whole text: this measure represents the complement to the probability that a word is significantly more (or less) frequent inside the parentheses than in the whole text (i.e. the lower the value, the more likely it is that the frequencies inside and outside the parentheses

are different).

The Pearson's coefficient helped to recognize where the parentheses are an integral part of the text and so where the same words and themes appear inside and outside the parentheses, and where they are an addition to the text (like citations or mathematical formulas) with different words and themes. Instead, the binomial test looks closely at the text and discovers which words characterize the lexicon inside the parentheses.

It can appear contradictory to try to highlight both similarities and differences between the parentheses and the rest of the text, but it is not. Just as two twins appear very similar to one another (and this peculiarity allows us to distinguish a couple of twins from a generic couple of siblings), if we step closer and look carefully at them, we will start to see some details which make each of them different. In the same way, I want to find when the parentheses are similar to the text (with the r^2 coefficient) but also, since they cannot be identical, how they differ (with the binomial test). Only the words with a p-value lower than 0.01 and at least 10 occurrences inside the parentheses (or parentheses after mark) were analyzed, to lower the possibility of false positives and errors caused by typos in OCR scans.

Results

Comparing Cavell with Other Authors

At first glance, we can identify an escapee in the upper right-hand corner of all three graphs reported in Figure 1: it is, as expected, Stanley Cavell. The total use of parentheses (i.e. the *parentheses ratio* as defined in "Measurements") amounts to 12%, while the use of parentheses after a mark (*dot parentheses ratio*) amounts to 7%. In the same way, although only slightly, the r^2 for Cavell's book is also the highest: the content of parentheses is in agreement with the content of the body of the text.

This similarity between text and parentheses is by no means obvious or expected. Before raising some possible explanatory hypotheses for this phenomenon, let us comment on the results of the benchmark authors. Wittgenstein and Austin (the 'masters') stand more or less in the middle of the table in terms of total use of parentheses. Although the overall use of parentheses is slightly higher in Wittgenstein, further investigation of the quantitative side reveals something surprising: the use

of parentheses after a mark, in fact, shows us that Wittgenstein is much closer to Cavell than any of the benchmark authors, with a value of 4%.

Figure 1. These three graphs represent the results of quantitative and qualitative measurements of the use of parentheses in Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* and the benchmark authors. The quantitative measurements have been divided into two parts: in the first graph on the left we find the calculation of total parentheses; while in the second graph, in the middle, we find the calculation of parentheses after a mark; finally in the third graph on the right we find the calculation made according to the r^2, which indicates the similarity between the text outside the parentheses and the text inside the parentheses.

Let us therefore leave Austin behind and focus only on Wittgenstein. For a reader of Wittgenstein, this result will perhaps not be too surprising: in the wilderness that is the *Philosophical Investigations*, one finds interruptions, backward marches, second thoughts, exclamations, retractions, different voices and tones, in dialogue with each other but also fighting each other, in a constant tension.[294] Now, one may ask: how to graphically represent these pauses and movements? What better typographic sign than a parenthesis? However, a skeptical Wittgensteinian voice could occupy the center of the scene for a moment and exclaim: '— What better typographic sign than the parenthesis? But we have the em dash to represent these movements!'. And this voice would certainly be right, as the em dash, at first glance, seems to outnumber even the parenthesis (a future distant reading work might dissolve, or at least give greater *visual clarity* to, this enigma in plain sight).

---

[294] In his "Wittgenstein's Texts and Style" (in *A Companion to Wittgenstein*, edited by H-J. Glock and J. Hyman, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2016, 41–55) David Stern makes a list of the devices typical of the later Wittgenstein: multiple voices, thought experiments, provocative examples, striking similes, rhetorical questions, irony, parody. Among them, Stern writes, the use of multiple voices is the most important aspect of Wittgenstein's style.

As the use of this last parenthesis shows, the parenthetical voice often stands out to announce, foretell, to the side, apart from, in counterpoint to the supporting themes of the body of the text. The high number of parentheses after a mark in Wittgenstein, as well as in Cavell, thus seems aimed at not wanting to give up these kinds of voices: *meditative* voices, often, *off-screen* voices, just as often, or simply voices *aside*. Let us consider a single, quite significant example: starting from paragraph 6 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, in fact, we see Wittgenstein inserting three sentences within parentheses after a dot:

> An important part of the training will consist in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word; for instance, the word 'slab' as he displays that shape. (I do not want to call this 'ostensive explanation' or 'definition', because the child cannot as yet ask what the name is. I'll call it 'ostensive teaching of words'. — I say that it will form an important part of the training, because it is so with human beings; not because it could not be imagined otherwise.) This ostensive teaching of words can be said to establish an associative connection between word and thing. But what does this mean? Well, it may mean various things; but one very likely thinks first of all that a picture of the object comes before the child's mind when it hears the word. But now, if this does happen — is it the purpose of the word? — Yes, it may be the purpose. — I can imagine such a use of words (of sequences of sounds). (Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.) But in the language of §2 it is not the purpose of the words to evoke images. (It may, of course, be discovered that it helps to attain the actual purpose.)[295]

The theme of this paragraph is language learning in the master–pupil relationship. The parentheses after the period are used by Wittgenstein to insert specifications and insights, useful for a greater understanding of the intent of his research. In fact, the first parenthesis after the period opens with 'I do not want to call this ...' and then continues with 'I'll call it ...'. This distinction is made by Wittgenstein in the parenthesis, a place in which to express temptations and desires, or even just thoughts that are more intimate and difficult, or perhaps difficult to justify, even if intuitively understandable. In fact, let us think about the use of the second sentence in parentheses after the period: 'Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination'. This simile helps Wittgenstein's thought; it makes it go forward even in its backwardness. In fact, the pause of the parenthesis does not totally divert from the topic under examination, it deepens it on the side,

---

[295] *Philosophical Investigations*, cit., §6.

with an illuminating (or obscure — depending on the reader) simile, which enriches the prose of th*e Philosophical Investigations* with a mosaic of voices. Finally, the last parenthesis after the period gives voice to an obvious possibility, one that had not been considered in the previous sentence but nevertheless deserves to be uttered, in that context, after what has just been stated. (Recall how Cavell wrote that not only the placing, but the timing contributes to the depth of an utterance: an unspoken obviousness, not taken into account at certain points in the work, may be missed by certain types of discerning readers.)

Of course, an even closer examination of the use of parentheses after a mark in Wittgenstein would be interesting. Just as it would be interesting to compare the use of parentheses after a mark in Wittgenstein and in Cavell. However, here I merely note the affinity in the purely quantitative use of this stylistic device. (The time spent commenting on the very first parentheses after a mark in the *Philosophical Investigations* was not spent in vain: it will come in handy when we take a closer look at this use in Cavell's work.) It was commonplace to say that Wittgenstein and Cavell use so many parentheses, and so many parentheses after a mark; now we can say how many.

I now turn to commenting on the results for the other benchmark authors (anti-theoretical and analytical). The results obtained do not help to differentiate the group of anti-theoretical authors much from the group of the most cited analytical authors. And that in itself is a significant result.

The group of anti-theorists reveals no major surprises. For all of them, the parentheses' ratios hover between 2% and 4%. Only Foot and MacIntyre fall below 2%, while Williams and Diamond exceed 4% (Williams by a little, Diamond by a lot, reaching almost 6%). Both, however, hover around 2% with regard to the use of parentheses after a mark, much the same as all other anti-theorists. In the r^2 measurement, however, the anti-theorists never drop much below 0.4, while the analytical group counts for 4 members below 0.4, ranging from 0.2 to 0.4 (Frege, Wright, Quine, and Burge). This may be due to the use of less discursive parentheses, as in the case of Quine and Frege where the parenthesis is often used to introduce mathematical formulas.

In the analytical group, Putnam and Fodor stand out in terms of the total use of parentheses. This is an interesting result, which raises an obvious question: why? Are there particular reasons (analogous to those shared by Wittgenstein and Cavell) that increase the overall use of parentheses in Putnam and Fodor? Let us take a closer look. Before we get into their parentheses, however, it may be useful to turn to the second graph. In this graph, in fact, the two philosophers suffer a major

recoil. Their use of parentheses after a mark moves to the left significantly for both. This result can help us in part to comment on their overall use of parentheses. If we browse through Putnam's and Fodor's texts, parentheses are often used to introduce citations in the body of the text (author-work citations: e.g. (Fodor 1983) — see Table 3) or to insert lists within the text ((i), (ii), (iii), etc.). The use of parentheses after a mark amounts for both of them to around 2% — almost half compared to Wittgenstein and almost a third compared to Cavell.

Table 3. List of significant words in parentheses for Fodor.
More (frequent) refers to the frequencies inside the parentheses compared to the whole text.

Fodor	Word	Count	p-Value
More	see	73	1.54e-39
More	,	493	3.82e-21
More	ed	16	5.04e-13
More	fodor	16	1.83e-09

Table 4. List of significant words in parentheses for Putnam.
More (frequent) refers to the frequencies inside the parentheses compared to the whole text.

Putnam	Word	Count	p-Value
More	or	183	7.85e-26
More	i.e.	3	1.77e-12
More	e.g.	26	8.45e-12

We can therefore hypothesize that it is a less pronounced use of parentheses after the mark that keeps Fodor's r^2 low: since most of the parentheses are used to do something else (quoting, making lists, …) and not to take up a theme addressed in the text, it is understandable that the similarity remains low. More interesting, however, is the case of Putnam: despite having a ratio of parentheses after a mark similar to Fodor, Putnam has a higher text/parenthesis similarity than Wittgenstein. How can this fact be explained?

It can perhaps be explained by hypothesizing that a classical, traditional use of parentheses (as an addition, or specification of the point under consideration — see Table 4) raises the similarity

index.

The last interesting case is Dummett. His number of parentheses (both total and after a mark) is relatively average, but his similarity index is almost tacked on to Cavell's. Looking at the list of words more frequently used in parentheses, as defined in "Measurements" and reported in Table 5, it appears to be composed of many meaningful words from the semantic field of mathematics: *fn* (as abbreviation for function)*, bound, relations, number, term, functions, singular, variable, category, operator*. Taking something written in the body of the text, and expanding on it and specifying it within the parentheses is how discursive parentheses work, when they are not used to introduce symbols or quotations or lists. One puts something in parentheses immediately after a consideration of one's own, to assign it a role of deepening and specifying, like a formal definition.

Table 5. List of chosen significant words in parentheses for Dummett.

More (frequent) refers to the frequencies inside the parentheses compared to the whole text.

Dummett	Word	Count	*p*-Value
More	fn	17	7.12e-13
More	bound	14	2.00e-04
More	relations	12	3.76e-04
More	number	24	5.20e-04
More	term	27	7.27e-04
More	functions	15	1.64e-03
More	singular	15	2.09e-03
More	variable	12	2.48e-03
More	category	10	4.39e-03
More	operator	15	7.05e-03

Now, one can certainly insert considerations to the side (for whatever reason) without necessarily using parentheses after a mark. In our opinion, it is the result of the parentheses after a mark that is interesting. During the reading, in fact, the parentheses after a mark can have a greater poetic effect (as in the example commented on above from *Philosophical Investigations*). As the second graph has well shown, this expedient of the parenthesis after a mark has been exploited more by Wittgenstein and Cavell.

In general, however, it is worth remarking once again how Cavell departs from the benchmark

authors in all three graphs with his use of parentheses. This detachment really signals his exceptionality and encourages an interest in a deeper study of his work. Let us therefore delve further into Cavell's work to try to see more closely some aspects of his use of parentheses.

Looking into Cavell

Let us start with the first graph in Figure 2. *Must We Mean What We Say?* by Cavell records a very high use of parentheses right away: 10% of the entire book. The two books that immediately followed, on the other hand, recorded a gradual decline in the use of parentheses: from 8% in *The World Viewed* to 6% in *The Senses of Walden*. Yet, as early as the publication of the expanded version of *The World Viewed*, which contains an appendix (*More of The World Viewed*, 1979) about half the length of the book published in 1971, the percentage returns to 10% — a percentage that is confirmed (with a very slight decrease) in the writing of the two appendices added by Cavell to *The Senses of Walden* in the 1981 expanded edition (and written in 1979 and 1980, respectively). After that, the use of parentheses in Cavell would never again drop below 9% and would even reach (almost) 15%. To what is the stabilization of this stylistic device due? Why is it that works like *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden* deviate from this normality of Cavell's style?

Figure 2. In these three graphs, we can observe the time progression (from top to bottom we find the last to the first book) of Stanley Cavell's writing regarding the use of parentheses. Books with a publication date are the subsection of the books split as described in "The Construction of the Corpus".

I will answer one question at a time, but before doing that, let us turn to the second graphic. The arrangements of the dots in the graph do not undergo any major shifts. *The World Viewed* and

The Senses of Walden are confirmed as the texts with the lowest percentages, even in the case of parentheses after a mark. A dozen texts, on the other hand, remain more or less stable between 5% (or slightly less, such as *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*) and 7%; the only ones to reserve some surprises are the remaining three texts that exceed 7%: *Pursuits of Happiness* slightly exceeds 7%, the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason* slightly exceeds 8%, while *This New Yet Unapproachable America* exceeds 9%. Inevitably, these new results generate new questions (which I again postpone answering).

We thus come to the third graph. The stabilization of Cavell's style could not be more evident. Aside from *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden* (including the second editions), which nonetheless register a fairly high degree of similarity between about 0.5 and 0.7, all the other texts rank extremely far to the right on the graph, with values between 0.8 (or slightly less, as in the case of *In Quest of the Ordinary*) and 0.9 (or slightly more, as in *Little Did I Know*).

These are the data. From now on I place myself on the interpretative ground. So, let us return to the first question that had arisen from the commentary on the first graph: why do *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden* differ from the rest of the books in the number of parentheses?

First, let us start by looking at some facts. These are two short books: one on film, and the other on Thoreau. Does this information tell us anything? Doesn't a short book need parentheses? When does a book need parentheses? I have said, quite obviously, that parentheses insert considerations on the side. How can this phenomenon be explained? Perhaps Cavell added fewer parentheses in these two books — which are also his first two books ever, after the essay collection *Must We Mean What We Say?* — because he has more sharply limited the boundary of his attention to the objects studied without digressing too much, as he had allowed himself in the essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* Possibly. Since both are very short books (the first editions of both run around 150 pages), it can be argued that Cavell preferred concision to digression. Perhaps, the commentary on Thoreau's prophetic and concise style in *The Senses of Walden* led Cavell to absorb his writing style as well (for instance, this is what Mark Greif claims in "Cavell as Educator")[296], while in *The World Viewed*, having to focus on the world of cinema and having to examine many films, Cavell did not have time to dwell much on any particular film,

---

[296] M. Greif , "Cavell As Educator." *n+1 Magazine*, 12, August, 2011.

but moved quickly (through very short chapters, the shortest ever in his production) to explore the rivulets of this world still (at the time) unknown to philosophical writing.

Take, for example, the back cover of *The World Viewed*.[297] There, you will find a critic's opinion that Cavell, in this book, "never lingers". Here, anyone who has ever read Cavell's other books will be surprised by this judgment and will instead be more inclined to agree with Larry Jackson's judgment that: "[In Cavell's books] there are distractions and afterthoughts, abrupt endings and slow, lingering pleasures — and of course, plenty of verbal sparring, too".[298]

In the books following *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden*, developing a way of proceeding already present in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell will allow himself many of these 'lingering pleasures', which are functional to the motivations of his philosophical prose[299] (Jackson in fact quotes a long parenthesis of an essay in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, "Ending the Waiting Game", as an example of the indirect and lingering style of Cavellian prose): motivations such as how to best describe in detail the objects examined, along with his own experience (as he claims in the *Introduction* to *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*).

On closer inspection, however, these judgments made about *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden* are limited. The total use of parentheses (always as *parentheses ratio*, defined in "Measurements") in the two texts is still quite high — between 5% and 7%, though not as high as the 10% of the other books. In a second sense, and more specifically, the judgments made just now about Cavell's first two books find themselves limited by the publication of their respective appendices in the late 1970s. These parts suffer from the stylistic turn (or return of modules already widely present in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, and only slightly set aside in *The World Viewed* and *The Senses of Walden*) represented by the writing of the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason*: a turn that will leave its traces until Cavell's last publication, the autobiography *Little Did I Know*.

A distant and quantitative reading was crucial to arrive at this conclusion. In the introduction and in the appendix to the new introduction of *The World Viewed*, indeed, I observed how the

---

[297] S. Cavell, *The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enlarged Edition, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1979.

[298] "A Different Path", *cit*., p. 507.

[299] See Section 3.2.

pronoun 'you' is repeated 20 times in the new parentheses (while it was used 15 times in the parentheses of the 1971 text, which was about twice as long as the new parts). Let us take as an example the very first parentheses of the introduction to the 1979 edition:

> The question of what constitutes, in the various arts, 'remembering a work,' especially in light of the matter of variable quotability, naturally raises the question of what constitutes, or expresses, 'knowing a work' (is recognizing it enough? is being able to whistle a few bars necessary? does it matter which bars?). These questions in turn lead to the question of what I have called 'the necessity to return to a work, in fact or in memory,' an experience I try hitting off by speaking of 'having to remember' ('The Avoidance of Love' in Must We Mean What We Say?, p. 314). (If you express this wish by whistling, you will have, unlike the former case in which you are expressing knowledge, to mean the whistling, which is not something everyone who can whistle can do.)[300]

The first parenthesis, inserted at the end of the sentence, is used by Cavell to raise three different questions; the second parenthesis, inserted after the dot, picks up the theme raised by the last two questions in the previous parenthesis. Now, it is not so important that in this paragraph Cavell reflects on "whistling" only in parentheses (not least because the activity of whistling is just a pretext — a pretext to talk about the emphasis we can put on performing many other more meaningful activities). What is important is that a subplot of the text is first hinted at in a parenthesis, only to be picked up again in a latter parenthesis: it is as if Cavell is trying to insert a text within the text, a subterranean plot that is entirely run through the parenthetical space.

Moreover, this plot is traversed from the point of view of 'you'. The fact that Cavell uses just the second person singular — and not the first person plural, as is often the case — and that he uses it in parentheses may mean something like: you, reader, pause here, and ask yourself what are the different ways of returning to a work of art. In the second parenthesis, Cavell points to two ways: returning to a work, such as a poem, by *means of knowledge* ('What is that poem by Montale called?' 'Ah, yes, *Ex voto*') and by *means of remembering*: remembering here understood as a re-bringing to mind, understanding anew what is at stake in that poem, rereading the poem and remembering, repeating what it may mean that 'it happens/that affinities of soul do not come to gestures but remain effused like a magnetism.' (This is the sense in which it is not enough to whistle

---

[300] *The World Viewed*, *cit.*, p. x.

a few stanzas to remember a melody, to remember what it means *to me* — you need to mean the whistling for such a thing to happen.)

Be that as it may, it is interesting to note how the passage in *Must We Mean What We Say?* devoted to remembering, to which Cavell refers in the little piece of the introduction to *The World Viewed*, is also found in a parenthesis. The plot thickens, and one discovers whole thematic rivulets that run through Cavell's work, traces of which are found mainly in the parentheses.

For example, the parentheses of Cavell's corpus abound with names of philosophers. This fact can be explained by assuming that there are considerations, raised by each of the philosophers, to which Cavell often returns in parentheses; further, it can be assumed that he uses this device to include, within his text, the voices of other authors who may not be central to the topic at hand, but may be laterally interesting. A significant example is the article Cavell wrote about *Mr and Mrs Smith*, a 2005 film starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, in which Wittgenstein makes an appearance in the parentheses;[301] following my line of reasoning, one can imagine that bringing up Wittgenstein helps Cavell to think, to develop his commentary on the film under consideration, but not to the point of making him occupy the foreground of the scene (Wittgenstein's role, in the economy of the article, is to stay in the background — or to make only a cameo).

In Cavell's corpus, one can count the occurrences of the following philosophers in the parentheses: Heidegger 101, Thoreau 111, Nietzsche 112, Austin 178, Emerson 271, Wittgenstein 277 (see Table 6).

Table 6. Count and significance *p*-value for philosophers' names significantly more frequent in parentheses for Cavell's corpus.

	Word	Count	*p* Value
More	thoreau	111	1.54e-08
More	hegel	35	1.20e-07
More	heidegger	101	6.72e-07
More	nietzsche	112	2.29e-06
More	wittgenstein	277	6.38e-05
More	descartes	55	7.04e-05

---

[301] S. Cavell, "Falling in Love Again", in *Film Comment*, 41.5, 2005, 50–54.

More	kant	123	7.68e-05
More	emerson	271	8.82e-05
More	kripke	29	1.98e-04
More	moore	21	2.39e-04
More	hume	33	3.96e-04
More	austin	178	4.16e-04
More	luther	13	8.24e-04
More	dewey	21	1.08e-03
More	lacan	20	1.09e-03
More	lewis	12	1.33e-03

However, from such a distance, it is difficult to observe the most recurrent themes in the Cavellian parentheses. In fact, I got the impression that it is much easier to capture a certain style, a certain tone, rather than the repetition of a certain type of theme. I spoke earlier about Cavell's use of an informal, engaging, and imaginative tone in the 1979 introduction to *The World Viewed*. This tone was facilitated by the opening of parentheses in which Cavell referred directly to a 'you'. Also, I noted how Cavell, in this period (around 1979, and after that), returns to using more parentheses in his texts. A book like *The Claim of Reason* (1979), then, is a good litmus test for whether this change (or rediscovery) of style is measurable within the text, particularly between the first three parts, written between 1955 and 1971, and the fourth part, which is instead the one written in the time closest to the 1979 publication.

The pronoun 'you' is repeated 150 times in the parentheses of the first three parts, while it is repeated 350 times in the parentheses of the fourth part. Without going to see more closely how 'you' is used these 350 times, I note that the fourth part is shorter than the first three, but is denser in the total use of parentheses, of parentheses after the mark, and of an expedient (the use of 'you') that we have seen to be typical of a certain parenthetical style. This fact confirms that Cavell is back — and that subplot I have been talking about continues to thicken from the mid-1970s onward, and will hold steady throughout his work.

Another stylistic aspect we have seen Cavell using in the 1979 introduction to *The World Viewed* is the question mark, repeated three times in the first parenthesis of the citation quoted above. With the stabilization of an informal and engaging, imaginative and reflective style, is there also a stabilization in the use of the question mark?

Let us look at the data again. Table 7 reports the list of the words recurring more in the parentheses than in the whole text (ordered by the significance of the comparison measured with the *p*-value as defined in "Measurements"), where I kept only prepositions, adverbs, conjunctions and punctuation. We can see that the question mark is part of this list, along with terms like 'or', 'though', 'perhaps', 'except', 'unless' and 'not'. Before discussing the use of the question mark, a few words regarding the other terms. The use of dubitative and concessive expressions, such as *perhaps* and *though*, are very significant for the change of tone sought by Cavell. They are able to dilute the point of examination and open up other perspectives (to which space is conceded, in fact). Moreover, the use of these expressions serves as an aid, as a crutch, for more adventurous and exploratory attempts: 'perhaps one might think so, but it is not certain'; 'though the point under examination is controversial, we can nevertheless …'. A large part of the pleasures of a Cavellian lingering comes from the parenthetical road opened up by these expressions.

Table 7. Count and significance *p*-value for conjunctions, prepositions, adverbs and punctuation significantly more frequent in parentheses for Cavell's corpus.

	Word	Count	*p* Value
More	or	2531	8.09e-48
More	though	192	4.32e-25
More	perhaps	383	9.44e-25
More	?	1173	8.18e-21
More	as	2849	1.91e-16
More	except	72	5.09e-15
More	hence	189	3.99e-13
More	,	13260	1.21e-09
More	in	4562	4.22e-09
More	like	314	1.51e-07
More	unless	55	8.87e-07
More	later	111	9.92e-07
More	explicitly	64	3.89e-06
More	anyway	64	4.29e-06
More	here	313	4.54e-06
More	notably	23	6.31e-06
More	not	2031	8.00e-06
More	especially	63	1.07e-05

More	doubtless	27	1.16e-05
More	grammatically	17	1.33e-05

With regard to the use of 'except', 'unless' or 'not' a somewhat similar argument can be made. The use of these expressions in parentheses can have the function of specification ('not in this sense, but in that sense ...'), but it can also have the function of introducing a road not taken in the course of the text and that will be followed — more or less briefly — in the parenthesis. Instead, the use of 'or' ultimately has to do with the multiplication of possible paths: 'does this mean this? (or does it not? Or could it mean something else?)'. However, 'not' and 'or' are very common words, inside and outside the parentheses. Therefore one could question their relevance in setting the *parenthetical tone*. But, it remains reasonable to assume that many of the occurrences of 'not' and 'or' are central to the economy of the parentheses: as, for example, when they open the parentheses, or close them. Upon a closer look at the files with the lists of parentheses, we encounter many uses of 'not' and 'or' at the beginning or at the end of the parentheses.

Let us take three examples at random from *Little Did I Know*:

1. (The possibility that nothing can be done was not voiced.)

2. (Evidently I am not quite beyond the defensiveness of authorizing my gratitude for Emerson's achievement by appealing to the grandeur of earlier readers of his who have sensed something of the sort.)

3. (Or is it the other way around – that I am using the mortal threat of the procedure, and of what it may reveal, to justify my right to tell my story, in the way in which I wish to tell it? What could this mean — my story is surely mine to tell or not to tell according to my desire? But of course the story is not mine alone but eventually includes the lives of all who have been incorporated into mine.)[302]

In her article on Stanley Cavell's writing, '"This is said on tiptoe": Stanley Cavell and the Writing of Philosophy' (2014), Áine Mahon talked about three uses of the parenthesis: additional, clarificatory and demonstrative.[303] My analysis led us to emphasize the first and the second use ('perhaps' and 'though', 'not' and 'or' — all four perform additional and clarifying functions). On

---

[302] *Little Did I Know, cit.*, p. 2.

[303] '"This is Said on Tiptoe"', *cit.*, p. 25.

the other hand, I have not talked about the third use, the demonstrative one, since it seemed to me to be the most standard use of the parenthesis, and therefore a little less interesting. I can, however, point out that even this more standard use is present in Cavell's parentheses: we find 'e.g.' 'i.e.', 'example', 'as' and 'like' in the list of the most significantly more frequent words in Cavell's corpus (see Table 8).

Table 8. Count and significance p-value for expressions which introduce an example significantly more frequent in parentheses for Cavell's corpus.

	Word	Count	p-Value
More	e.g.	161	1.10e-65
More	i.e.	94	1.73e-23
More	example	244	2.53e-17
More	as	2849	1.91e-16
More	like	314	1.51e-07

Then, I can finally discuss another very characteristic element of the Cavellian parentheses: the question mark. In the four books which use more parentheses (*This New Yet Unapproachable America; Philosophical Passages; Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome; A Pitch of Philosophy*), the question mark appears in the list of the most significantly more frequent words. In these texts, the readers have the opportunity to stop in the parenthetical space and listen to the question being asked in a different tone than a question they would encounter in the body of the text. *Sottovoce*. I am therefore reminded of Peter Szondi's interpretation of Celan's poem *Engführung*, in which the literary critic comments on Celan's reprise of an almost identical passage of the incipit within the concluding parenthesis;[304] the poem in fact begins with *Displaced into/ the terrain/ with the unmistakable track: Grass, written asunder. [...]* and ends with (almost) the same words repeated in the final parenthesis: *Displaced into/ the terrain/ with the unmistakable track: Grass/Grass/ written asunder.*[305] We can observe how the displacement of the text in the parenthesis mirrors the

---

[304] P. Szondi, "Reading 'Engführung': An Essay on the Poetry of Paul Celan", translated by D. Caldwell and S. Esh Source, *boundary 2*, Spring, 1983, Vol. 11, No. 3, The Criticism of Peter Szondi (Spring, 1983), pp. 231–264.

[305] P. Celan, "Stretto", in *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry*, A Bilingual Edition, translated by P. Joris, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 2020, pp. 227–239.

displacement which opens the poem: the final parenthesis contributes to stress the unmistakable track which the poem follows, and which is now, at the end of it, *reclaimed* (and revised: the Grass in fact doubles itself, perhaps mirroring its condition of being written *asunder*). There are many examples of parenthetical uses in poetry, and it is not at all useful to lump them all together. Szondi's considerations serve only insofar as they show that, in poetry, parentheses make it possible to insert many voices into the text. They provide changes of tone. So it is in poetry, but also in philosophy with poetic ambition, as seen in Wittgenstein and Cavell.

Then we can ask ourselves: in Cavell's texts, what are the effects of inserting many voices (for instance, through the insertion of question marks within the parenthetical space)? Are these effects aimed at stressing and emphasizing the various things — which can form "an unmistakable track"— to which the text alludes? Or are they aimed at appealing to the sensibilities of different possible readers? Or maybe their aim is to awaken — or reclaim — different parts, or voices, or tones of voices, of Cavell himself (which he might be tempted to keep quiet, for instance out of repression or shame)? Be it as it may, inserting many voices allows Cavell to appeal to different *selves* (of the text, of the readers, of the writer).

An attention to the plurality of the self, and to the circles of which it is composed, and of which it ceaselessly composes itself, is known to be a characteristic of the vision that Cavell, taking it from Emerson's philosophy and writing, calls *perfectionist*. By 'perfectionist', Cavell — apart from the themes I have discussed in this dissertation — also means a view of the self as constantly in motion, traveling from a condition of darkness to one of greater clarity, from a present self to a future self.[306] A journey that is as old as that of Plato's allegory of the cave and that is still alive today, and that is revived every time our current self undergoes a conversion and sets itself in motion to form a further, broader, freer self — and for whom many figures could come to the rescue, such as that of the friend, the teacher, and our own no longer repressed self. The parenthesis therefore represents a constant dialogue and counterpoint of one self with another, in a movement that never stops; or rather, that stops at each point, to start again after the next point (or after the next mark — it could start after the next period or the next question mark).

---

[306] S. Cavell, *Preface to the Italian Edition of The Claim of Reason*, in *Here and There*, cit., 215–222, p. 222.

Conclusion

In this section, I measured, observed and commented on some signs of the birth and growth of Cavell's *stylistic perfectionism*: the massive presence of parentheses after a mark (which open to another self of the text, in counterpoint to the main body); the use, within normal parentheses and parentheses after a mark, of pronouns such as 'you' or punctuation marks such as '?'. Moreover, I also briefly observed how the lingering movement of the parenthesis is expressed by dubitative and concessive formulas such as 'perhaps' or 'though'; or by the negation ('not') of alternative ways (which are excluded but at the same time remembered in parentheses); or by the massive use of 'or', which contributes to increase the ambiguity and multiplicity of dimensions to which Cavell's writing refers (as pointed out, among others, by Mahon).

It was not news to Cavell's readers that he had sought a tone for philosophy, as the title of one of his last texts, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, reminds us. An interesting result of this research was to see more clearly how this tone was formed and stabilized by the use of parentheses. A use that, through Cavell's comparison with some of his contemporary philosophers, turned out to be exceptional: an exceptionality referred both to the use of parentheses after a mark (an expedient shared in large part by Wittgenstein) and to the use of expressions (such as the second-person singular, or the question mark, or the dubitative and concessive expressions...) able to form an idiosyncratic style, endowed with many souls and many voices, deeply perfectionist in spirit. Finally, this section showed how a distant reading approach, which benefits from relatively simple statistical tools, can provide new suggestions (or put old ones under a new light) on how to interpret and explain the style (or more generally some semantic traits) of a literary work, as well as that of a philosopher.

A philosopher who, from his first work, was very aware that the parenthesis was a trademark of his philosophical style, and that it made a difference in his philosophy. And he was not wrong. The parentheses thus represent a privileged place in which to see the effect of a philosophical style at work: the formal elements that change within the parentheses, and which we have measured, contribute to having a philosophical effect that is of interest to the psychological Cavell that we have been investigating throughout the dissertation.

They represent, to use a psychoanalytic image, *the return of the repressed* — the repressed that Cavell stubbornly refuses to remove from his philosophical prose, in accordance with one of the

most mysterious and elusive criteria of Emersonian perfectionist writing (according to which, we recall, it restitutes to us our repressed thoughts). For instance, we saw how Cavell reclaims his more wavering thoughts, or questions that don't find space into the main body of the text, or how he addresses directly a 'you', a reader, in the parentheses — that have precisely the function to preserve something that otherwise would be lost, or pushed away. So the parentheses are the privileged space where Cavell returns his repressed thoughts to his text, with an invitation to his readers to do the same.

5.2 Both Academic Philosopher and Cultural Critic: Quantifying Two "Souls" of Bernard Williams's Style

Introduction

As Krishnan and Queloz recently showed in *The Shaken Realist. Bernard Williams, The War, and Philosophy as Cultural Critique* (2022), Bernard Williams's work can also be read as the work of a cultural critic and not just as that of an academic philosopher.[307] In their paper, Krishnan and Queloz focus on the interpretation of two aphorisms found in the epigraph to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, by Wallace Stevens and Albert Camus. These are two authors who will not appear again in the plot of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, but are used by Williams to allude to a broader cultural context in which his book fits. A similar operation is also carried out in Williams's last work, *Truth and Truthfulness*, in which he places a passage on war from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as an epigraph to the text.[308] Similarly to the case of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, here too Proust (like Stevens and Camus before) will no longer make an appearance within *Truth and Truthfulness*. He will remain an author that Williams wants to leave at the margin of his text, almost as if to signal a threshold that will be crossed as he begins the book. This threshold, simplifying a bit, is that of the academy of philosophy.

All of Williams's books, in fact, however much they make the effort to use a 'moderately plain speech', are full of references that will almost exclusively be grasped by an audience already familiar with the themes, debates and works of authors of professional philosophy contemporary to him, perhaps with the sole exception of the presence of some ancient authors or classics of thought. Of course, there is no lack of erudite references in Williams's overall work. But even the reader most sympathetic towards Williams (i.e.: willing to read most of the erudite references as more than a mere display of culture) will assume that they represent a minority within his oeuvre. (In *Morality* and *Moral Luck*, first Luther and then Pelagius are to be found, but not as much as, in the respective books, Peter Geach and Derek Parfit).

---

[307] N. Krishnan – M. Queloz, "The Shaken Realist. Bernard Williams, The War, and Philosophy as Cultural Critique", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2022.

[308] *Truth and Truthfulness*, cit.

But what about Williams himself? What did he think about the composition of his own work? Of course, there could be many places where to look for such a self-judgment, but I think that the *Night Waves Interview with Bernard Williams* is a privileged one. Here, towards the end, the interviewer summons a judgment by Ben Rogers — A. J. Ayer's biographer — on Williams's overall work. Rogers' contribution expresses regret that Williams's work, while acknowledging the limits of the academy, still remained too academic (and did not, like Isaiah Berlin, turn towards a 'more literary' philosophy):

> **Rogers**: [...] I've no doubt that Williams will be read in a hundred years time, there are not very many moral philosophers of whom that's true. But I think he'll be read mainly by academics and sort of students, much as he is today. I don't know how Williams feels about that. I mean, on the one hand, he values rigour and sophistication and intellectual discipline. On the other, he does want to bring philosophy closer to life. And he thinks that novelists and playwrights and poets and painters are often much better at doing that than academic philosophers. So you might have expected him to make a transition to a more literary sort of philosophy like Isaiah Berlin, who he learnt from and who was close to, but he didn't. I can't help feeling a bit of him must regret that, it would certainly have been in the spirit of his work if he had.[309]

As one can see, here the terms of the discussion are the following: there are figures like "academics" and "sort of students" (who "value rigour, sophistication and intellectual discipline") on the one hand, and, on the other hand, there are figures like "novelists, playwrights and poets" (who "bring philosophy closer to life"). Bearing in mind Section 4.2, we could think of such figures as Moi-Like and Lui-like figures. My claim, in that section, was that "Williams's philosophy can thus best be described as a condensation of the interaction between *Moi* and *Lui*".[310] So, in current terms, as having both an academic and a cultural "soul".

What does Williams himself think? How did he respond to Ben Rogers' judgment? Williams seems to be sympathetic to Rogers' comment, although he also is keen to emphasize some typical features of his philosophical writing:

---

[309] '*Night Waves* Interview with Bernard Williams', *cit.*, p. 10. See *infra* pp. 133–134.

[310] See *infra* p. 194.

As an aside, we can note how Rogers' comments are approached with a little skepticism by Williams. Who knows how academics will do in 100 years time, or how something like an introductory class of Philosophy will look like (something like "Philosophy 206")? However, Williams's response, here, is interesting because it expresses certain hopes and fears. The hope is that "somebody somewhere", in the future, interested "in such topics" (let us say moral philosophy issues, or humane questions) would pick up and read one of his essays — without necessarily being engaged in a philosophical training. The fear is that only people engaged in a philosophical training would be able to actually read, and understand, what he wrote. However, this fear does not imply that Williams is ashamed, or repudiates, the technicality or the technical basis (as he calls it) of its writing.

Now, these claims by Williams are certainly fascinating and provide useful images to approach his work. However, they remain (and do not want to go any further, given the context of the interview) at an impressionistic level. It may therefore be useful to extract two central points encompassed in them. The two characteristics that Williams ascribes to the type of essay that, he believes, could be of interest to his future readers are as follows: 1. This essay does not necessarily have the appearance of a paper assigned for an academic course ('Philosophy 206'); 2. it is nonetheless technical or has a technical basis. These two points, in light of the discussion of Krishnan and Queloz's paper on Williams and philosophy as cultural critique, can also be integrated or transformed in the following way: 1. Williams's works are less academic than paradigmatically academic works; in fact, they are also cultural. 2. Williams's works are less cultural than paradigmatically cultural works, in fact they are also academic (e.g., they continue to use a certain technicality).

---

[311] '*Night Waves* Interview with Bernard Williams', *cit.*, p. 10.

The major goal I set myself in this section is to explicate[312] and to verify, empirically, these two points. The best way to do this is to rely on quantitative methods, explicating these two points and providing solid data on Williams's entire work. The explication works as follows: first, I need to define what 'academic Williams' is through the assignment of a corpus; second, I need to define what 'cultural Williams' is through the assignment of another corpus. In the definition of the corpus, therefore, is comprised the explication of the concept 'academic Williams' and 'cultural Williams'.

In my view, Williams's work can be divided, *a priori*, i.e. regardless of the authors cited, into these two corpora: the *academic work* and the *cultural work*. By that I mean that all ten books published in Williams's lifetime can reasonably be labeled as 'academic': this is because of the audience to which they are addressed and the specialism of the issues dealt with. While there is only one major book, published posthumously, in which all the essays and reviews written by Williams, and published in newspapers and magazines with a wider circulation, not strictly academic, such as *The Spectator*, *New Statesman*, *London Review of Books*, and *New York Review of Books* (just to name a few of the most famous places), have been collected.[313] This work can be labeled 'cultural' in that its intended audience is different, and broader, than that of its academic books, and the issues examined concern problems of greater intellectual scope.

---

[312] This operation that I am doing, and I am calling explication, in line with Carnap (1950: *Logical Foundations of Probability*, Chapter 1) is what in the digital humanities is often called operationalization, a term originally introduced by PW Bridgman in his *Logic of Modern Physics* (1927). I am not using this concept because, in actual fact, a more thorough operationalization will be performed only when the four categories of authors are extracted after the first two tables. To get an idea of the debate on operationalization in the digital humanities see, for example: F. Moretti, "'Operationalizing': or, the function of measurement in modern literary theory", Pamphlet of the Stanford Literary Lab, Pamphlet 6, December 2013, 1–13; A. Betti – H. van den Berg, "Modelling the History of Ideas", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22 (4), 812–835, 2014.; G. Bonino – P. Tripodi, "Distant Reading and the Problem of Operationalization. Goldilockean Considerations", *CoSMo Comparative Studies in Modernism*, n. 18 (Spring) n. 18, 2021, 187–196.

[313] *Essays and Reviews*, cit.

Moreover, I still need to take into account another concept: that of 'academic aspects' and of 'cultural aspects' present in Williams's works. Both aspects are interpreted in terms of 'references'.[314] That is, if a work has a certain number of academic authors cited it is, in a certain sense, academic; conversely, if a work has a certain number of cultural authors cited it is, in a certain sense, cultural. I believe that measuring the amount of references in Williams's cultural and academic work, differentiating also between the various types of references, will be able to illuminate both starting points. Indeed, measurement will help us answer two fundamental questions: 1. Does Williams's academic work encompass cultural references (which turn the papers and books of that work into something different than usual papers assigned for an academic course like "Philosophy 206")? 2. Is it true that Williams's papers, even those belonging to the cultural work, still encompass a great number of academic references (so being "nonetheless technical or having a technical basis)?[315] This second question, in particular, would seem to be less obvious. In light of what we have seen in this dissertation, in fact, we might expect Williams to take advantage of a cultural context to shed the robes of the classical analytical philosopher, and to express himself with greater freedom (and less technicality). We shall see if indeed this is the case.

Now, we are left with few ways to answer either of these questions other than to turn to quantitative methods. They do, in fact, as seen in Section 5.1, allow us to get an overall view of an author's style and, in this case, will allow us to measure accurately and comprehensively the references used by Williams; by measuring how many and which authors are most used in two corpora of Williams's work, we will be able to have a solid basis on which to anchor our judgements (a basis that we could not have obtained from qualitative observation alone). Let us see, in concrete terms, how we have constructed this basis.

---

[314] I am not using the term 'references' here in the proper sense, as for instance it is dealt with in the field of citation analysis, where they talk about works; but I am using it in more general terms because really what I am going to talk about are the most cited authors.

[315] As one can see, I am also explicating the concept of 'technicality' through the concept of 'academic aspect'. That is, I am reasonably assuming that a work that encompasses more academic references will end up being more technical.

Acquisition and Pre-Processing[316]

Firstly, I proceeded by extracting the content of the books as plain text either by converting the EPUB version using Calibre (https://calibre-ebook.com/) or by extracting the text from a PDF file using the *pdftotext* tool from the Poppler suite (https://poppler.freedesktop.org/) or, again, Calibre. Secondly, I cleaned the text by removing heads and tails (which include introductions, conclusions, prefaces, tables of contents, etc.), empty rows and the titles of the chapters. The whole process is documented in the online additional material (https://github.com/TnTo/williams/blob/main/clean.sh). Finally, the texts were divided in single words using the NLTK's function *word_tokenize* (https://www.nltk.org/), the words composed only by letters with the first one uppercased were selected, and then the occurrences of each of these words were counted (https://github.com/TnTo/williams/blob/main/names.py). From the list of the uppercased words I selected the surnames manually. It is now time to devote ourselves to reading the extracted data.

Results

ACADEMIC WORK

Descartes	1290
Plato	661
Aristotle	480
Socrates	424
Nietzsche	276
Kant	196
Strawson	176
Rawls	156
Hare	150
Wittgenstein	132
Sidgwick	124

---

[316] Also in this section I profited from the technical expertise of Michele Ciruzzi, who helped me in the phase of acquisition and pre-preprocessing of the corpus explained in this section.

Homer	117
Hume	116
Moore	116
Collingwood	108
Rousseau	90
Thucydides	85
Nagel	82
Ayer	77
Herodotus	64
Smart	64
Parmenides	62
Rorty	56
Sophocles	54
Mill	49
Euripides	49
Wiggins	49
Leibniz	47
Gorgias	46
Hegel	45
Protagoras	45
Snell	44
Dworkin	43
Nozick	41
Mackie	41
McDowell	39
Berlin	39

James	35
Hobbes	35
Napoleon	33
Kutchinsky	33
Mersenne	32
Locke	32
Diderot	32
Frankfurt	31
Aeschylus	30
Davidson	30
Shoemaker	29
Tertullian	28
Parfit	27

CULTURAL WORK

Wagner	136
Rorty	120
Rawls	116
Nagel	110
Russell	104
Nozick	104
Nietzsche	100
Plato	72
Kant	63
Eco	60
Chomsky	57
Taylor	54

MacIntyre	54
Descartes	53
Dreyfus	52
Wittgenstein	51
Hampshire	46
Moore	41
Cowling	39
Parfit	39
Austin	38
Minsky	35
Ayer	34
Sen	34
Hegel	31
Sartre	31
Aristotle	30
Ryle	29
Heidegger	29
Goldmann	28
Nussbaum	27
MacKinnon	27
Wisdom	26
Putnam	26
Dworkin	26
Mackie	25
Johnson	24
Willey	23

Schelling	22
Hume	21
Clark	21
Galileo	20
Bok	20
Crossman	18
Rousseau	18
Skinner	18
Ponting	18
Marx	17
Lasch	17
Locke	16

These two tables collect the top fifty most frequently used surnames in the academic corpus and in the cultural corpus. I have not taken into account capitalized adjectives: such as Kantian, Wittgensteinian, Marxist, etc. Furthermore, I have removed from the tables the surname 'Williams', because I am not interested in self-reference; I have also removed the surname 'Smith' because, after checking, it turns out to be a sum of references to different philosophers (and fictional characters), all called 'Smith', and not just to Adam Smith, whose actual references are too few to make it into the list of first fifty; finally, I had to leave off of the list 'Berkeley' because, as it turned out, without the references to the homonymous city of Berkeley, the references to the philosopher are again too few to manage to make it into the list.

Looking at these two tables, it occurred to me to divide the cited authors into four categories: non-philosophers; non-Anglo-American philosophers who lived after 1900; philosophers who lived before 1900; professional Anglo-American philosophers who lived after 1900. Of course, these four categories are contestable and others can be proposed. They are, after all, the last steps of the explication of the concept of 'academic' and 'cultural' aspects that was started above. The usefulness of these categories will depend on the quality of the observations they succeed in

inspiring. So, as far as the first table (*Academic Work*) is concerned, we can make this quick calculation:[317] non-philosophers are 10 (Homer, Thucydides, Herodotus, Sophocles, Euripides, Snell, Napoleon, Kutchinsky, Aeschylus, Tertullian); non-Anglo-American philosophers who lived after 1900 are zero; philosophers who lived before 1900 are 19 (Plato, Descartes, Aristotle, Socrates, Nietzsche, Sidgwick, Kant, Hume, Rousseau, Parmenides, Mill, Leibniz, Gorgias, Hegel, Protagoras, Hobbes, Mersenne, Locke, Diderot); professional Anglo-American philosophers who lived after 1900 are 21 (Wittgenstein, Strawson, Rawls, Hare, Moore, Collingwood, Nagel, Ayer, Smart, Rorty, Wiggins, Dworkin, Nozick, Mackie, McDowell, Berlin, James, Frankfurt, Davidson, Shoemaker, Parfit).

On the other hand, regarding the second table (*Cultural Work*): the non-philosophers number 14 (Wagner, Chomsky, Cowling, Minsky, Sen, Johnson, Willey, [Thomas] Schelling, Galileo, Clark, Crossman, Skinner, Ponting, Lasch); the non-Anglo-American philosophers who lived after 1900 are 4 (Eco, Sartre, Heidegger, Goldmann); the philosophers who lived before 1900 are nine (Nietzsche, Plato, Kant, Descartes, Hegel, Aristotle, Hume, Marx, Rousseau); the professional Anglo-American philosophers who lived after 1900 are 23 (Rorty, Rawls, Nagel, Russell, Nozick, Taylor, MacIntyre, Dreyfus, Wittgenstein, Hampshire, Moore, Parfit, Austin, Ayer, Ryle, Nussbaum, MacKinnon, Wisdom, Putnam). For the two corpora, then, taking into account both the number of authors per category and the number of total occurrences of each author in the respective corpora — the number marked, in the table, to the right of the author — these percentages came out.

	ACADEMIC	**CULTURAL**
No Phil	10: **20%** (537: **9%%**)	14: **28%** (482: **21%**)
No Anglo	/	4: **8%** (148: **6,5%**)
Phil < 1900	19: **38%** (4082: **69%**)	9: **18%** (455: **20%**)
Phil > 1900	21: **42%** (1314: **22%**)	23: **46%** (1183: **52%**)
Tot.	50 (5933)	50 (2268)

[317] Of course, this classification is not only theory-laden but also controversial; for example, it is not at all obvious whether an author like Tertullian should be considered a philosopher or not. In any event, the controversial cases are few (others are, e.g., Luther and Unamuno, Chomsky and Sen) and are statistically insignificant.

From these percentages,[318] we can already make four main observations.

1. Contrary to what might have been expected, Williams refers to a great many professional Anglo-American philosophers of the 20th century in *Essays and Reviews*. On closer inspection, here, in the cultural corpus, these references are even greater than in the academic corpus: 46% (23) vs. 42% (21). But, above all, the number of occurrences of this type of author within both corpora is truly significant: 1183 occurrences (52% of the total number of references to authors) of Phil anglo>1900 in *Essays and Reviews* compared to 1314 occurrences of Phil Anglo>1900 in the academic corpus.

2. Another observation that can be made is that, in the top fifty most recurring authors' surnames, there is no trace of non-Anglo twentieth-century philosophers (so-called continental philosophers). Not a single one. Whereas in *Essays and Reviews* we find four references to these authors (as we have seen, these are Eco, Sartre, Heidegger and Goldmann), with 148 occurrences, i.e. 6.5% of the total occurrences.

3. There are also many references to pre-1900 philosophers in the entire academic corpus, and many in the cultural corpus. A data — like that concerning Phil Anglo>1900 — that goes against the initial expectations. There are 19 references to more classical authors in *Academic Work* (38%), with a total of 4082 occurrences (69%) — a result that suffers from the strong influence of Williams's 1978 book on Descartes. The references to classical authors in *Cultural Work*, although more than halved, are still quite high: 9 references (to philosophical classics such as Nietzsche, Plato, Kant, Descartes, Hegel, Aristotle, Hume, Marx, Rousseau), i.e. 18 % of the first fifty references.

4. As a fourth and final observation, we can note (this time more in line with the initial expectations) that many references to non-philosophers are found in *Essays and Reviews*, precisely 14 in the top 50 most used (i.e., 28 %), and even more precisely 482 occurrences out of the total 2268 (i.e., 21 %). These references to non-philosophers are many, yes, but not so many more than the non-philosophers cited in the academic corpus. Here, too, their

---

[318] Of course, I had the scruple that once a higher number of references for both corpora were taken into account, the percentages might change significantly. But instead, even taking into account the first 500 surnames cited for each corpus, the percentages still remain very similar, without changing significantly.

numbers are rather high: 10 out of 50 (20%) and 537 occurrences out of 5933 total occurrences (9%). Moreover, at a quick glance, we can observe that in the No-Phils of the academic corpus, ancient authors prevail (6 out of 10), whereas in the No-Phils of the cultural corpus, contemporary authors prevail (12 out of 14).

These are the data. Before trying to interpret them, however, let us see how these references evolve over time. I decided to divide both corpora into three time intervals, all three (roughly) of 15 years:

ACADEMIC WORK

1. 1959-1973: *Morality, Problems of the Self, Utilitarianism, Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (chapters: 1-4), *The Sense of the Past* (chapters: 7-12-18);
2. 1974-1988: *Descartes, Obscenity and Film Censorship, Moral Luck, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (chapters: 6-7; 14), *The Sense of the Past* (chapters: 1-9-14-15-16);
3. 1989-2002: *Shame and Necessity, Making Sense of Humanity, Truth and Truthfulness. Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (chapters: 5; 8-13; 15-17), *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (except chapter 8), *The Sense of the Past* (chapters: 2–3- 4-5-6-8-10-11-17-21-22-23).

CULTURAL WORK

1. *Essays and Reviews* (1959-1973): p. 3 - p. 100;
2. *Essays and Reviews* (1974-1988): p. 101 - p. 282;
3. *Essays and Reviews* (1989-2002): p. 283 - p. 412.

Dividing the two corpora into these three parts and searching for the 50 most frequently used surnames in each of these parts yielded the following results:

ACADEMIC WORK 1 (1956-1973)

No Phil		Phil No Anglo		Phil<1900		Phil Anglo>1900	
Napoleon	31	Schlick	7	Aristotle	58	Strawson	166
Tertullian	27	Sartre	4	Hume	56	Smart	54
Cardinale	15			Plato	54	Hare	33
Beauchamp	11			Kant	34	Shoemaker	29
Marcion	9			Lucretius	14	Coburn	15
Giorgione	6			Descartes	11	Moore	11

	No Phil	#	%	Phil No Anglo	#	%	Phil<1900	#	%	Phil Anglo>1900	#	%
	Unamuno	5					Berkeley	9		Nagel	11	
	Sen	5					Mill	7		Russell	9	
	Luther	4					Spinoza	6		Hampshire	6	
	Gresham	3					Leibniz	3		Geach	5	
	Boyer	3					Nietzsche	3		Rawls	5	
	Lenin	2					Spencer	3		Ryle	4	
							Hobbes	2		Austin	4	
							Rousseau	2		Dummett	3	
							Sidgwick	2		Wiggins	3	
										Ross	3	
										McTaggart	3	
										Searle	2	
										Kenny	2	
										Pears	2	
										Wollheim	2	
TOT:		50										
		12	24%		2	4%		15	30%		21	42%
TOT:		771	121			11			265			373
			16%			1%			34%			49%

CULTURAL WORK 1 (1956-1973)

No Phil		**Phil No Anglo**		**Phil<1900**		**Phil Anglo>1900**	
Willey	23	Goldmann	28	Descartes	47	Dreyfus	52
Galileo	19	Sartre	21	Kant	27	Hampshire	43

	No Phil		Phil No Anglo		Phil<1900		Phil Anglo>1900	
	Skinner	18	Heidegger	4	Plato	25	Austin	38
	Crossman	16	Lukács	3	Aristotle	9	Rawls	34
	Lewis	8			Hegel	7	Ayer	29
	Tillich	3			Hume	7	Moore	22
	Brahms	2			Socrates	7	Wittgenstein	19
	Butterfield	2			Rousseau	6	Russell	17
	Chomsky	2			Locke	5	Warnock	14
	Darwin	2			Kierkegaard	4	Popper	4
	Freud	2			Nietzsche	4	Ryle	2
	Hitler	2			Spinoza	4		
	Kepler	2			Bacon	3		
	Leavis	2			Leibniz	3		
	Minsky	2			Marx	3		
	Newton	2			Pascal	2		
	Paley	2			Berkeley	2		
	Pericles	2						
TOT:		50						
		18	36%	4	8%	17	34%	11	22%
TOT:		608	111		56		167		274
			18%		9%		28%		45%

ACADEMIC WORK 2 (1974-1988)

	No Phil		**Phil No Anglo**		**Phil<1900**		**Phil Anglo>1900**	
	Kutchinsky	33			Descartes	1166	Hare	106
	Galileo	22			Aristotle	219	Rawls	83

	Sen	15				Plato	153	Wittgenstein	62
	Lloyd	11				Socrates	147	Moore	45
	Yaffé	10				Kant	95	Ayer	36
	Anderton	9				Parmenides	44	Parfit	26
	Chomsky	8				Mersenne	31	Kenny	25
						Hume	26	Rorty	22
						Sidgwick	26	Frankfurt	19
						Locke	21	Nagel	18
						Mill	20	Blackburn	16
						Leibniz	19	Harman	14
						Pascal	16	Nozick	14
						Gassendi	16	Wiggins	14
						Arnauld	14	Hacker	13
						Berkeley	14	Ross	12
						Hobbes	13	McDowell	11
						Nietzsche	11	Mackie	10
						Burman	11	Fried	10
								Burnyeat	9
								Scanlon	9
								Hintikka	9
								Smart	8
								Richards	8
TOT:		50							
		7	14%	0	0%	19	38%	24	48%

TOT:	2743	108		0		2036		599
		4%		0%		74%		22%

CULTURAL WORK 2 (1974-1988)

	No Phil		**Phil No Anglo**		**Phil<1900**		**Phil Anglo>1900**	
	Chomsky	54	Heidegger	19	Nietzsche	59	Nozick	104
	Cowling	39	Kolakowski	6	Plato	32	Russell	82
	Minsky	33	Derrida	5	Hegel	17	Rorty	64
	Schelling	22			Locke	9	Parfit	39
	Clark	21			Kant	8	Nagel	32
	Ponting	18			Marx	8	Rawls	31
	Lasch	17			Rousseau	6	Ryle	27
	Thompson	13					Dworkin	24
	Elster	11					Wisdom	24
	Sutherland	10					Mackie	23
	Dawkins	8					Wittgenstein	21
	Leavis	8					Bok	20
	Powell	6					Moore	19
	Silk	6					MacIntyre	16
	Wilson	6					Ramsey	14
	Dalyell	5					Shklar	11
	Goudsblom	5					Murdoch	10
	Stern	5					Midgley	7
	Wagner	5					Dewey	6
							Searle	6
							Ayer	5
TOT:	50							

	19	38%	3	6%	7	14%	21	42%

	19	38%	3	6%	7	14%	21	42%
TOT:	1046	292		30		139		585
		28%		3%		13%		56%

ACADEMIC WORK 3 (1989-2002)

	No Phil		Phil No Anglo		Phil<1900		Phil Anglo>1900	
	Homer	116	Nino	27	Plato	450	Collingwood	107
	Thucydides	82	Benjamin	15	Nietzsche	262	Wittgenstein	74
	Herodotus	63			Socrates	257	Moore	54
	Sophocles	51			Aristotle	204	Nagel	53
	Euripides	49			Descartes	113	Ayer	40
	Snell	41			Sidgwick	96	Rorty	34
	Aeschylus	29			Rousseau	88	Wiggins	32
	Pericles	20			Gorgias	43	Mackie	31
	White	20			Protagoras	39	McDowell	28
	Levi	17			Hegel	37	Vlastos	24
	Dodds	17			Hume	35	Davidson	24
	Vernant	17			Diderot	31	Habermas	23
	Redfield	16			Mill	22	Berlin	23
					Hobbes	20	Burnyeat	18
					Parmenides	18	Singer	18
					Marx	16	Shklar	18
							MacIntyre	16
							Taylor	16
							Austin	16
TOT:	50							

	13	26%	2	4%	16	32%	19	38%

	13	26%	2	4%	16	32%	19	38%
TOT:	2960	538		42		1731		649
		18%		1%		59%		22%

CULTURAL WORK 3 (1989-2002)

	No Phil		**Phil No Anglo**		**Phil<1900**		**Phil Anglo>1900**	
	Wagner	130	Eco	60	Nietzsche	37	Nagel	78
	Sen	34	Foucault	12	Kant	28	Rorty	56
	Johnson	23	Sartre	7	Plato	15	Rawls	51
	Gergen	7	Heidegger	6	Hume	10	Taylor	51
	Gutman	7	Adorno	4	Aristotle	9	MacIntyre	38
	Tolstoy	7	Derrida	3	Hegel	7	MacKinnon	27
	Culler	6			Marx	6	Nussbaum	27
	Hitler	5			Rousseau	6	Putnam	25
	Ibsen	5			Seneca	5	Wittgenstein	11
	Proust	5			Diderot	4	Russell	5
	Orwell	4			Godwin	4	Scruton	4
	Shakespeare	4			Nikidion	4		
	Booth	3			Aquinas	3		
	Cosima	3			Augustine	3		
	Dumas	3			Feuerbach	3		
	Eliot	3						
	Goethe	3						
	Lawrence	3						
TOT:	50							
		18	36%	6	12%	15	30%	11	22%

TOT:	864	255		92		144	373
		29,5 %		10,5 %		17%	43%

From these tables we can draw the following observations:

1. There are more Phil Anglo>1900 in *Cultural Work* than in *Academic Work* and this trend also increases over time. In *Cultural Work* 1 (1959-1973) we find 45% references to Phil Anglo>1900, while in *Cultural Work* 2 (1974-1988) these references grow to 56%, and then settle down to around 43% in *Cultural Work* 3 (1989-2002). In contrast, in *Academic Work* there is no growth and no readjustment. On the contrary, over time the references to Phil Anglo>1900 drop considerably and more than halve. It goes from 48,5% in *Academic Work* 1 (1959-73) to 22 % in *Academic Work* 2 (1974-1988), and to 22% in *Academic Work* 3 (1989-2002).

How can these trends be explained? They seem to indicate an increasing disinterest on Williams's part to consider the work of his colleagues within an academic context (in the form of the paper, and the collection of specialized papers). However, this does not mean that he stops considering the work of his colleagues, contemporary Anglo-American professional philosophers. On the contrary, there is a context in which this interest in discussing with them, their themes and publications, remains constant (and even increases over time). This context is that of the cultural essay, in which we can assume that Williams feels freer to express himself, and in which he can do public philosophical work that is relatively accessible to the educated and interested person. The technicalities and difficulties will undoubtedly also be present in that context; but they will be filtered through the more public sphere, in which the debate becomes a matter of interest to the cultured adult, who will find in these texts elements of popularization and mediation by Williams.

2. Phils<1900 are higher in academic corpus and tend to rise in this context. Indeed, we go from 34,5% in *Academic Work* 1 (1959-1973) to an actual peak in *Academic Work* 2 (1974-1988), 74%, certainly influenced by the publication of Williams's book on Descartes.

In any case, in *Academic Work* 3 the references to Phil<1900 remain high, the highest among the four categories of authors. In *Cultural Work*, on the other hand, these references drop slightly: from 28% in *Cultural Work* 1 to 13% in *Cultural Work* 2 (1974-1988), to remain around 17% in *Cultural Work* 3 (1989-2002).

Here again, a similar problem as before arises: how to interpret these opposing and contrasting trends? One hypothesis is to link the increase of references to classics of thought in *Academic Work* to the decrease of references to contemporary authors. Indeed, it seems that Williams is interested in continuing to write more academic contributions in the historical-philosophical sphere. Here, in fact, the professionalization of research finds one of its best expressions, allowing the historian of philosophy to better handle, and eventually advance, one's own field. Let us say: this more historical-philosophical sphere seems to be more immune to the problems of professionalization that make Williams move the philosophical (mainly ethical-political) debate elsewhere. At the same time, that essays and the reviews are increasingly becoming the place to discuss contemporary problems is confirmed by the decline of Phil<1900 in this corpus.

3. Finally, we can see how both No Phils and No Anglos increase over time in the cultural corpus. No Phils start at 18% in *Cultural Work* 1 (1959-1973), grow to 28% in *Cultural Work* 2 (1974-1988), and then settle at 29.5% in *Cultural Work* 3 (1989-2002). Furthermore, we can observe how the No Phils, from a little more than half of the Phils<1900 in *Cultural Work* 1 (18% vs. 28%), come to be around twice as many as the Phil<1900 in *Cultural Work* 3 (29.5% vs. 17%). The growth of references to No Anglo in *Cultural Work*, however, is much smaller. It starts with 9 per cent in *Cultural Work* 1 (1959-73), declines to 3 per cent in *Cultural Work* 2 (1974-1988) — the period of the publication of the book on Descartes — and finally settles down to around 10.5%, increasing a little from the beginning (and approaching the Phils<1900, which, as we have seen, have since halved). While as far as the academic corpus is concerned, the almost total absence of references to the No Anglo is very significant (the percentages never exceed 1% in all three periods). The references to No Phil are more substantial, but still rather small. The 16% in *Academic Work* 1 (1959-73) collapses to 4% in *Academic Work* 2 (1974-88) — like

all other references apart from Phil <1900 — but then becomes 18% in Academic Work 3 (1989-2002).

That of No Phil and No Anglo is another interesting area from an interpretative point of view. First of all, the initial hypothesis that Williams uses many more cultural references, from non-philosophical fields, or fields not strictly related to twentieth-century Anglo-American professional philosophy, is confirmed but in a rather restrained manner. In fact, while it is true that in *Cultural Work* 3 the No-Phil comes to count for 29.5%, in *Academic Work* 3 they are only around ten points below, at 18%. More significant — though still around a ten-point gap — is the distance between the No Anglos in the two corpora. Within *Academic Work*, as we have seen, there is never more than 1% (whereas in *Cultural Work* 3 there are 10.5% No Anglos). This absence of No Anglos in the academic corpus sheds quite clear light on the philosophical influences of the professional philosopher Williams: they come, almost exclusively, from the Anglo-American sphere. As much as Williams may be considered one of the philosophers least prejudicially averse to other traditions, these data show well that an openness to them — however small — certainly does not take place in the academic context; the few times it does, we can instead find it in his essays and reviews.

The Tradition (of Analytical Philosophy) and the Individual Talent

Coming back to the two initial questions, I can finally find an answer to both. Regarding the first one ("Does Williams's academic work encompass cultural references?") I can say that yes, Williams's academic work does contain cultural references, which remain stable over time (remember that No Phils go from 16% to 18%). This confirmation is significant but not totally unexpected: any discerning reader of Williams's work, aware of his erudite and humanistic approach, as well as his emphasis on the limits of philosophy, might have expected that cultural references would be abundant in the academic corpus as well, and not only in the cultural corpus.

The data we have extracted, together with the reported observations, have allowed us to confirm this fact (and, in addition to confirming it, to make the reference to the number of 'cultural references' cited , such as the ones of non-philosophers, precise and to the point) and also to make some useful additions: for instance, we noted that references to non-Anglo-American philosophers

are almost non-existent in the academic work while very low in the cultural work. One might have expected low numbers, but coming to know that they are so low is another of the fruits of the quantitative method. However, one might wonder: are the percentages of No Phil in Academic Work that high? The assessment of whether they are high or not is relative, that is, it depends on the measurement of the same parameters in other authors. The impression, however, is that these percentages are not that high; or rather, however one evaluates this point, these numbers show that Williams never gets to exaggerate this cultural datum to the point of stepping outside his analytical academic tradition (as did, for example, a philosopher like Rorty, who was interested in keeping his cultural voice alive in spite of his academic philosophical affiliation).

In order to better understand the type of philosopher Williams embodied, who seems to want to get out of pure philosophy, letting his research and writing be contaminated by other fields, but who, at the same time, does not end up becoming entirely a cultural critic — for it seems that, as much as he wants to do something different, and broader, he also wants to continue to do it within academic philosophy — let us go and look at the answer to the second question.

Here, significantly, the results found allowed this section to arrive at a truly innovative interpretation and against initial expectations. The question was: "Is it true that Williams's papers, even those belonging to the cultural work, still encompass a great number of academic references (so being 'nonetheless technical or having a technical basis')"? Yes, it is true, if we look at the way Williams intervenes in the public sphere using the reference authors of the analytical tradition. As we have observed, this second question being in some ways less obvious, one might have expected that a self-conscious philosopher like Williams, who feels too restricted by the self-referentiality of a certain analytical philosophy, would be eager to shed his professional philosopher's habit and, once crossed the threshold of the cultural arena, would indulge in extra-academic discussions (in the words of Ben Rogers: discussions about "novelists and playwrights and poets and painters" instead of "academic philosophers"). Whereas an actual quantification of Williamsian references frustrates these expectations. The analytical philosopher Bernard Williams, by continuing to discuss authors like Thomas Nagel, Robert Nozick and Charles Taylor also in the public arena, contributes to creating an image of the analytical philosopher who, instead of rejecting the tradition, incorporates it and discusses it in the public space, contributing to making it alive and relevant.

One of the merits of Eliot's influential early essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*,[319] was precisely that it noted how the individual contribution of a particular artist could shape a tradition in order to create a new, transformed one. If we look at the relationship between the analytical tradition and the individual talent, in the case of Williams, we can conclude that 'Williamsian' (despite the fact that Williams went to great lengths during his lifetime to reject this, as much as any other, label), in all accounts, could apply to this character trait of the professional philosopher who, despite seeing the limits of his own discipline and profession, does not shy away from speaking about it in public, and, indeed, increases the discussion of academic philosophical issues over time by trying to make them accessible and of interest to the general public.

Given the skeptical character of Williams's work and personality, we could also see, in this protracted and deepened choice over time, a reluctance on his part to give others what they would have expected from him: if every academic recognises him as a quick and talented analytical philosopher, then he will deepen his image as a historical and humanistic philosopher; if the cultural sphere expects him to talk about non-academic works and issues, then he will go on investigating philosophical problems within the tools of analytical philosophy. Being a maverick, a provocateur, a mistrustful animal,[320] he will never give to the academics and the cultural critics what they expect from him. In Piedmontese we say "bastian contrari"; in English there is the word "contrarian", or "maverick". In any case, it seems that Williams's two souls will never be at peace with each other.

This is as far as the two souls are concerned. The master (so to speak) of both, however, seems to be very comfortable in embodying both. In particular, he seems to be equally comfortable both in being technical and wearing the robes of the academic philosopher in the public arena, and in bringing elements of cultural criticism into the university arena. The two souls thus stand in a dialectical relationship with their opposites, challenging and encouraging to broaden their perspective, but they are well controlled and deployed by Williams himself. Who, indeed, was already aware of this fact in the *Night Waves Interview*, revealing, once again, that he is a stylist of philosophy.

---

[319] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in *Selected Essays* 1917–1932, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932, 3–11.

[320] "A Mistrustful Animal. An Interview with Bernard Williams", in *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Volume XII, Spring 2004, 81–92.

6. Concluding (and Reopening) Remarks

There is however a speedy limit to the use of heroes. Every genius is defended from approach by quantities and unavailableness. They are very attractive, and seem at a distance our own: but we are hindered on all sides from approach. The more we are drawn, the more we are repelled. There is something not solid in the good that is done for us. The best discovery the discoverer makes for himself. It has something unreal for his companion, until he too has substantiated it. It seems as if the Deity dressed each soul which he sends into nature in certain virtues and powers not communicable to other men, and, sending it to perform one more turn through the circle of beings wrote "Not transferable", and "Good for this trip only", on these garments of the soul. There is somewhat deceptive about the intercourse of minds. The boundaries are invisible, but they are never crossed. There is such good will to impart, and such good will to receive, that each threatens to become the other; but the law of individuality collects its secret strength; you are you, and I am I, and so we remain.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men*

This dissertation aimed to study two philosophers particularly aware of problems of style in philosophy, Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams. From their awareness sprang, as we have seen, particularly marked and idiomatic choices for dealing with such problems of style.

Those who at first were presented as two stylists in philosophy, now, at the end of the dissertation, proved indeed to be so. Their slant, however, over the course of their lives and of their philosophical production, has driven them further and further apart. After the opening chapter on "Emersonian perfectionism", the dissertation took a path that, only in retrospect, revealed to correspond to Cavell and Williams's periods of life. We went through Chapter Two, which followed Cavell and Williams in their rejection of (respectively) emotivist and utilitarian philosophical theories. Their youthful impulse beat in a direction that still seemed particularly consonant, kindred (with some telltale, or signal, of emerging differences — as noted in the epilogue to Chapter Two). Chapter Three, then, followed the formation of the two philosophical styles in their maturity. The adult, well-established style of Cavell and Williams still met common philosophical needs, but the execution was profoundly different — and, interestingly, even opposite. The two stylistic methods at the antipodes, compression and lingering, thus represented a foreshadowing of how the philosophical styles of the two philosophers would reach different fulfillment in old age. During the interlude, I took the time and space to point out this difference in all its depth. Cavell emerged as a philosopher more shifted to the psychological side, while Williams to the political side. This juxtaposition of psychology and politics was further explored in Chapters Four and Five, in which it was possible to observe, first at the qualitative level (Chapter Four), and then at the quantitative

level (Chapter Five), how the philosophical style of Cavell's and Williams's old age comes to delineate very different types of philosophers, even with respect to their tradition of belonging (Anglo-American analytical philosophy): Cavell's intimate philosophical style gives rise to the figure of an outsider with respect to the academic philosophy contemporary to him, while Williams's dialectical philosophical style gives rise to the figure of a maverick, independent-minded and contrarian (provoking the academic sphere with a cultural spirit and the cultural sphere with an academic attitude), yet internal and embedded in the analytical philosophy contemporary to him.

"A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the whole system of human pursuits", Emerson wrote (as we have seen in the Introduction). Cavell commented on this passage by bringing up the imperceptible shift of the point of a compass: at first this shift is imperceptible; in the long run, it makes all the difference in the world. Also in the Introduction, it was mentioned that, from the perspective of Emersonian perfectionism, the term "culture" can be rewritten with that of "style". Thus, let us read again Emerson's passage, "A new degree of style would instantly revolutionize the whole field of human pursuits".

In the course of the dissertation, we could see how difficult it is to achieve a new degree of culture, or style. The talent and discipline of Cavell and Williams put them both in a position to achieve it, this new degree, with handsome (for their admirers) and unhandsome (for their detractors) results. As Cavell himself warned, however, the direction of the point of the compass, in the long run, makes all the difference in the world. And so it did. Cavell became an outsider, Williams became a maverick. Perhaps this is proof that their achieved, conquered style was truly idiomatic, and was truly unrepeatable enough to mark a significant difference. The two paths traced, with slightly different but still attuned (metaphilosophical) angles at the beginning of their philosophical journey, along the way diverged too much and no longer met. The direction taken by their style, sharpened with time and during the respective periods of life (youth, maturity and old age), was able to upturn this metaphilosophical similarity.

The fact remains that a new degree of culture, or style, was achieved by both philosophers. These perfectionists friends, Stanley Cavell and Bernard Williams, with their idiomatic style, revolutionized "the entire system of philosophy contemporary to them", thus becoming "representative men", i.e. models — or rather, different exemplars of Emersonian perfectionism — for anyone who would like to undertake the attempt to find one's own style in philosophy.

Notes in the margin

"As ever — hope you won't find it <u>too</u> thin". This is the handwritten dedication by Bernard Williams for the copy of "Morality and the Emotions", the inaugural lecture given at Bedford College of London in 1965, sent as a gift to Stanley Cavell. The two philosophers had met, and become friends, only two years earlier. I believe this dedication contains a trace of the consonance of intents and of the future separation of trajectories between them. "Hope you won't find it <u>too</u> thin" (with the word so underlined, in the original). Bernard here seems to be expressing the hope that his friend Stanley will not find his own inaugural speech too "thin", in the sense of meager. This hope seems to imply that Bernard Williams expects that Stanley Cavell, as he has known him, will find this writing, by his own criteria (not yet explicitly, but on their way to becoming Emersonian perfectionist), too thin, meager. May Williams have in mind here the conversations, recalled by Cavell in his own autobiography, about 'writing better than one is'? We may never know, though it seems possible to me. In any case, we are here in 1965. Neither of them has yet published their first book. Their aversion[321] to certain stylized (too thin?) ways of describing the moral life — which instead, as they both believe, needs much richer and more complex (much thicker?)[322] approaches — however, is being worked out at this time.

After that, they part ways, and the two friends go a long time without meeting. Dating from 1978 is another find from Cavell's library — a dedication by Williams addressed to his friend in *Descartes. The Project of Pure Inquiry* (1978): "To Stanley and Cathy Cavell", so reads the official, printed dedication of the volume. By hand Williams adds, "Not just for what it says, but for what it means". The dedication is an affectionate play on words with the title of Cavell's first published collection of essays. Williams, playing with words, still seems to agree with Cavell that the

---

[321] An aversion that, as happens among friends, was also expressed in "human, all too human" ways: in mocking and parodying, among themselves, with their private jokes, the approaches of those philosophers whom they considered pretentious but of little substance. I draw these little personal anecdotes from private conversations with their respective widows, Cathleen Cavell and Patricia Williams, whom I had the opportunity to meet during my visiting periods at Cambridge and Harvard Universities, where I was able to view Bernard Williams's books owned by Stanley Cavell and vice versa.

[322] It is also interesting to observe, in the use of this "thin", an anticipation of the distinction that Williams would develop some two decades later between "thin" and "thick" concepts in ethics.

important thing — in writing philosophy — is not to give up the richness in the expression of *meaning* (and what we mean when we say something); a richness that must be searched for in the most personal ways possible, *finding one's own style*.

As we have seen, these personal ways, sought and found by both Cavell and Williams, of expressing themselves in philosophy, turn out to be — in some interesting ways — opposed to each other. In a note in the margin of *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994), this time in the copy collected in Williams's library, we find an annotation particularly revealing of this fact. Cavell's sentence is: "Who beside myself could give me the authority to speak for us?" and Williams's closing remark is "Just do it". As if to say: "I am interested in what you have to say, but get to the point" (throughout the book there are several ticks on the side, used by Williams to mark particularly happy moments in the text he reads). This annotation, at least to me, also seems like a warning of Williams to himself. As if to say: "I would get straight to the point, not linger on this question". Yes, because the stylistic method Williams found in his philosophical maturity lies in compression and not, like Cavell, in lingering.

Two years later, in 1996, Williams is sent Cavell's book on melodrama. The *New York Review of Books* encloses a letter inside the volume inviting him to review the book. This review will never see the light of day. Why? We do not know. What we do know is that Cavell never reviewed Williams's work either. It is as if the two, after all, knew or acknowledged each other's differences while remaining friends and continuing to respect each other philosophically.

When, in 2002, Williams, already ill with cancer, is awarded an honorary degree at Harvard University, a dinner party is held in the evening. At the table we meet, among others, Richard Moran and Tim Scanlon with their respective wives. According to Moran's recounting,[323] the two philosophers, when they see each other, they exchange a smile from a distance, draw close and embrace. In my dissertation, as it were, we took the reverse route: we started from the embrace of the two philosophers and then arrived at the distance between them. But the smile of understanding they exchanged from afar, even in the distance, remains. "As ever". I could find no better image than this to close my dissertation.

---

[323] This anecdote of Richard Moran, like those of Cathleen Cavell and Patricia Williams, was recounted to me in conversation.

7. Bibliography

Stanley Cavell's Primary Works

The Claim to Rationality. Knowledge and the Basis of Morality (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1961).

Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays, New York, Charles Scriber's Sons, 1969; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; updated versions, 2002 and 2015.

The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film, New York, The Viking Press, 1971; New York, Penguin, 1977.

The Senses of Walden, New York, The Viking Press, 1972.

The Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979; Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982; updated version, 1999.

The World Viewed. Reflections on the Ontology of Film (enlarged edition), including new: "Foreword to the Enlarged Edition" and "More of The World Viewed", Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1979.

The Senses of Walden. An Expanded Edition, including new: "Thinking of Emerson" and "An Emerson Mood", San Francisco, North Point Press, 1981; Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1981.

Themes Out of School. Effects and Causes, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Disowning Knowledge. In Six Plays of Shakespeare, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1987; updated 2003 to *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*.

In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1988.

This New Yet Unapproachable America. Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994.

Philosophical Passages. Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995.

Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

The Cavell Reader, edited by Stephen Mulhall, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996.

Emerson's Transcendental Etudes, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003.

Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005.

Cavell on Film, edited by William Rothman, Albany, SUNY Press, 2005.

"Falling in Love Again", in *Film Comment*, 41.5, 2005, 50–54.

Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2006.

Little Did I Know. Excerpts from Memory, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2010.

Les voix de la raison. Wittgenstein, le scepticisme, la moralité et la tragédie (1979), traduit par N. Balso and S. Laugier, Paris, Seuil, 2012.

Here and There. Sites of Philosophy, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2022.

Bernard Williams's Primary Works

"The Hatred of Philosophy", *The Isis*, 4 December 1957.

Morality. An Introduction to Ethics (1972), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Problems of the Self. Philosophical Papers 1956-1972, Cambridge, UK,Cambridge University Press, 1973.

J.J. C. Smart – B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Descartes: the Project of Pure Inquiry (1978), London, Routledge, 2005.

Obscenity and Film Censorship. An Abridgement of the Williams Report, edited by Bernard Williams, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1979

Moral Luck. Philosophical Papers 1973-1980, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

B. Williams – A. Sen (edited by), *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (1985), London, Routledge, 2011.

Shame and Necessity, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993.

Making Sense of Humanity. And other Philosophical Papers 1982-1993, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

The Human Prejudice. Talk at Princeton with Q and A. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2YN7s7V82w&fbclid=IwAR1eG6mdOFFRWAVF5SkBrY R2DktiqOXsvCd-gLmltU5a7mkovaAE1p5xXbQ, 2002.

Truth and Truthfulness. An Essay in Genealogy (2002), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

In the Beginning Was the Deed. Realism and Moralism in Political Argument, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

On Opera, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2006.

Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline, edited by A. W. Moore, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

The Sense of the Past. Essays in the History of Philosophy, edited by M. Burnyeat, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

Essays and Reviews (1959-2002), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014.

Interviews with Bernard Williams

"The Uses of Philosophy. An Interview with Bernard Williams", *The Centre Magazine* (November/December), 1983, 40–49.

"An Interview with Bernard Williams", *Cogito*, 8, 1, 1994, 3–19.

John Davies, "A fugitive from the pigeonhole", in *Times Higher Education*, 1996.

'*Night Waves* Interview with Bernard Williams', (London: BBC Radio 3, September 30, 2002), transcript by Alexander Bonham.

Stuart Jeffries, "The quest for truth" , in *The Guardian*, 30 November, 2002.

"A Mistrustful Animal. An Interview with Bernard Williams", in *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Volume XII, Spring 2004, 81–92.

Secondary Works

J. Altham – R. Harrison (edited by), *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

P. Anderson, "The Minstrels of M.I.5", *The Isis*, 6 November 1957.

G. E. M., Anscombe, *Intention*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1957.

E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der Abendländischen Literatur*, Bern, A. Francke Verlag, 1946.

J. L. Austin, *A Plea for Excuses*, in *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961.

 J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Second Edition, edited by J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1975.

A. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1991.

A. Baz, "Stanley Cavell's Argument of the Ordinary", in *The Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, 7, n. 2, 2018, 9–48.

W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, edited by M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, G. Smith, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1972/1999.

A. Betti – H. van den Berg, "Modelling the History of Ideas", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22 (4), 812–835, 2014.

A. Betti – H. van den Berg, "Towards a Computational History of Ideas", in *CEUR Workshop Proceedings*, 1681, Luxembourg, 2016.

A. Betti, H. van den Berg, Y. Oortwijn, and C. Treijtel, "History of Philosophy in Ones and Zeros", in *Methodological Advances in Experimental Philosophy*, London, UK, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

S. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984.

S. Blackburn, "Making Ends Meet: A Discussion of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*", *Philosophical books*, 27(4), 1986, 193–203.

B. Blanshard, *On Philosophical Style*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1969.

G. Bonino – P. Tripodi, "Academic Success in America: Analytic Philosophy and the Decline of Wittgenstein", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 28 (2), 359–392, 2019.

G. Bonino, P. Maffezioli, and P. Tripodi, "Logic in Analytic Philosophy: A Quantitative Analysis", *Synthese*, 198: 10991–11028, 2020.

G. Bonino – P. Tripodi, "Distant Reading and the Problem of Operationalization. Goldilockean Considerations", *CoSMo Comparative Studies in Modernism*, n. 18 (Spring) n. 18, 2021, 187–196.

P. Bourdieu, "Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociale*s, 145, 2002, 3–8.

B. Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner* (1965), San Francisco, City Light Books, 2001.

P. W. Bridgman, *Logic of Modern Physics*, New York, Macmillan, 1927.

T. Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2010.

J. F. Burrows, *Computation into Criticism*, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 1987.

R. Carnap, *Logical Foundations of Probability*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1950.

P. Celan, *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech: The Collected Earlier Poetry*, A Bilingual Edition, translated by P. Joris, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 2020.

R. Cluett, *Canadian Literary Prose. A Preliminary Stylistic Atlas*, Toronto, Ontario, ECW Press, 1990.

D. Colussi – P. Zublena, a cura di, *Giorgio Caproni. Lingua, stile, figure*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2014.

J. Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator" in *Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 181–257.

G. F. Contini, *Esercizi di lettura sopra autori contemporanei con un'appendice su testi non contemporanei*, Firenze, Parenti, 1939.

D. Cueni – M. Queloz, "Whence the Demand for Ethical Theory?", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 58 (2), 2021, 135–146.

P. D'Angelo, a cura di, *Forme letterarie della filosofia*, Roma, Carocci, 2012.

A. Danto, *The Body/Body Problem. Selected Essays*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996.

D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980), Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2013.

P. De Bolla, E. Jones, P. Nulty, G. Recchia, and J. Regan, "The Idea of Liberty, 1600–1800: A Distributional Concept Analysis", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 81 (3): 381–406, 2020.

C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit. Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (1991), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1995.

D. Diderot, *Oeuvres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, Gallimard, 1951.

P. Donatelli and S. Laugier, edited by, "Symposia. 'Perfectionism and Pragmatism'", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, II-2, 2010.

F. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (1864), New York, Random House, 1994.

M. Dummett, *Frege. Philosophy of Language*, New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973.

U. Eco, *Six Walks into the Fictional Woods*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1994.

T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* 1917-1932, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932.

R. W. Emerson, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by Stephen E. Whicher, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1957.

R. W. Emerson, *Political Writings* (1860-1876), edited by Kenneth Sacks. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

M. Frank, "Style in Philosophy: Part I", *Metaphilosophy*, Volume 30, Issue 3, July 1999, 145–167; and M. Frank, "Style in Philosophy: Parts II and III", *Metaphilosophy*, Volume 30, Issue 4, October 1999, 264–301; original German version is M Frank, *Stil in der Philosophie*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 1992.

E. Friedlander, *J. J. Rousseau, An Afterlife of Words*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004.

J. W. Goethe, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), Goethe sämtliche Werke, edited by Waltraud Wiethölter and Christoph Brecht., vol 8, Frankfurt am Main, Deutscher Klassiker, 1994.

N. Goodman, "The Status of Style", *Critical Inquiry*, 1(4), 1975, 799–811.

R. Goodman, edited by, *Contending With Stanley Cavell*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

J. Findlay, *Values and Intentions*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1961.

J. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press Ltd, 1983.

P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (1978), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

S. Fish, *The Stanley Fish Reader*, edited by H. Aram Veeser, London, Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

G. Frege, "Sense and Reference", *The Philosophical Review*, 57 (3), 209, 1948.

I. Hacking, "'Style' for historians and philosophers", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, Volume 23, Issue 1, 1–20.

R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking. Its Levels, Method, and Point*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981.

H. L. A. Hart, "Who Can Tell Right from Wrong?", *The New York Review of Books* (April 17), 1986, 49–52.

G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 1977.

F. Jameson, *Sartre. The Origin of a Style* (1961), New York, Columbia University Press, 1984.

A. Kenny, "Clouds of Not Knowing", Review of *The Claim of Reason* by Stanley Cavell, *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 (April, 1980).

B. Krajewski, "Review of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*", *Philosophy and Literature*, 17, 1, 1993, 156–158.

S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1980.

N. Krishnan – M. Queloz, "The Shaken Realist. Bernard Williams, The War, and Philosophy as Cultural Critique", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2022.

M. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, New York, Grove Press, 1988.

L. Jackson, "A Different Path: Why Stanley Cavell Won't Get to the Point", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 29 (4), 2015, 503–521.

J. Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink, New York, W.W.Norton & Company Inc., 2006.

J. Lacan, "Freud Forever: An Interview with *Panorama*", *Hurly-Burly*, Issue 12, January 2015, 13–21.

B. Lang, *The Concept of Style* (1979), Revised and Expanded edition, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1987.

D. LaRocca, edited by, "Acknowledging Stanley Cavell", *The Journal of Cavellian Studies*, No. 7, 2019.

J. Lear, "Useful Skepticism", Review of *The Claim of Reason* by Stanley Cavell, *The New York Times Book Review*, (December 2, 1979).

D. Lewis, *Convention. A Philosophical Study* (1969), Oxford, UK, John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel. A Historic-Philosophical Essay of the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1916), trans. A. Bostock, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1971.

A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (1981), Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Á. Mahon, edited by, "The American Style in Philosophy", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Volume 39, 2014.

Á. Mahon, "'This is Said on Tiptoe': Stanley Cavell and the Writing of Philosophy", *IJAS Online*, 3, 2014, 23–33.

C. Malaterre, J-F. Chartier, and D. Pulizzotto,"What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Science? A Computational Topic-Modeling Perspective, 1934–2015", *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science*, 9 (2), 215–249, 2019.

A. MacIntyre, "Alasdair MacIntyre on the Claims of Philosophy", *London Review of Books*, June 5–18, 1980.

J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994.

C. McGinn, "Isn't it the Truth?", *The New York Review of Books* (July 10), 2003, 70–73.

J. Miles, *Major Adjectives in Romantic Poetry,* University of California Publications in English, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1946, 305-426.

A. Moore, "On Saying and Showing", in *Philosophy*, Volume 62, Issue 242, October 1987, 473–497.

R. Moran, *The Philosophical Imagination. Selected Essays*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

F. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London, UK, Verso Books, 2013.

F. Moretti, "'Operationalizing': or, the function of measurement in modern literary theory", Pamphlet of the Stanford Literary Lab, Pamphlet 6, December 2013.

S. Mulhall, "The Mortality of the Soul: Bernard Williams's Character(s), in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*, edited by Alice Crary, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2007.

J. P. Muller-W. J. Richardson, *The Purloined Poe. Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1988.

I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), London, Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2013.

F. Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human. A Book for Free Spirit* (1878-1880), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-christ*, *Ecce Homo*, *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

J. Rée, "English Philosophy in the Fifties", *Radical Philosophy*, 65, 1993, 3–21.

K. A. Pearson, *A Companion to Nietzsche*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

L. Perissinotto, "'Il lavoro è rigorosamente filosofico e insieme letterario'. Note al Tractatus logico-philosophicus e sulla sua Prefazione", *Il Pensiero. Rivista di filosofia*, LX-2021/2, 1–7.

E. Petrovich, "Accumulation of Knowledge in Para-Scientific Areas: The Case of Analytic Philosophy", *Scientometrics*, 116 (2), 1123–1151, 2018.

E. Petrovich – V. Buonomo, "Reconstructing Late Analytic Philosophy a Quantitative Approach", *Philosophical Inquiries*, 6, 151–182, 2018.

E. A. Poe, *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe. An Annotated Edition*, edited by Stuart Levine and Susan Levine, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1976.

H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (1981), Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (1960), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press Ltd, 2013.

R. Rorty, "Philosophy of the Oddball", *New Republic* (19 June), 1989.

B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), New York, Simon & Schuster, 1967.

E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Vintage, 1993.

E. Said, *On Late Style. Music and Literature Against the Grain*, New York, Random House Inc, 2006.

A. Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, trans. A. B. Bullock, London, Swan Sonnenschein, 1903.

R. Scruton, "Ethics for the Amoral", *The Times*, September 21, 1995.

R. Scruton, *An Intelligent Guide to Modern Culture*, London, Duckworth, 1998.

L. Seaton, "The Sound Makes All the Difference. Stanley Cavell's Style", *The Point*, Issue 28, October 18, 2022.

V. B. Šklovski, *O teorii prozy*, Moskva, Teoretičeskaâ rabota, 1925.

L. Spitzer, *Stilstudien*, München, Hueber, 1928.

J. Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l'obstacle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.

D. G. Stern, "Wittgenstein's Texts and Style", in *A Companion to Wittgenstein*, edited by H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2016, 41–55.

C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (1944), New Haven, Yale University Press, 1958.

P. Szondi, "Reading 'Engführung': An Essay on the Poetry of Paul Celan", translated by D. Caldwell and S. Esh Source, *boundary 2* , Spring, 1983, Vol. 11, No. 3, The Criticism of Peter Szondi (Spring, 1983).

H. D. Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

L. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1972.

P. Tripodi, *Analytic Philosophy and the Later Wittgensteinian Tradition*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

C. Van Eck, J. McAllister and Van De Vall, *The Question of Style in Philosophy and the Arts*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

R. Warshow, *The Immediate Experience. Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (1962), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001.

T. Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (2000), Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2002.

P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (1958), London, Routledge, 1990.

L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), trans. by C. K. Ogden, New York, Dover Publications Inc, 1999.

L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte, London, John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2009.

L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, edited by R. Rhees, New York, Harper & Row, 1958.

L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1977), edited by G. H. Von Wright, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998.

R. Wollheim, *Art and its Objects* (1968), Second Edition, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

C. Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992.