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Impressions of Meaning in Cavell's Life Out of Music

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STANLEY CAVELL WASN'T THE FIRST TO ARRIVE at philosophy through a life with music.[1] Nor was he the first whose philosophical practice bears the marks of that life. Jean-Jacques Rousseau "testifies to the harmony between his musical work and his philosophy in his *Dialogues*."[2] Friedrich Nietzsche saw himself as "the most musical of all philosophers"—presumably more than even his musico-philosophical mentor, Arthur Schopenhauer—and asserted in all seriousness that "without music, life would be an error."[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein told his friend Maurice Drury, "It is impossible for me to say in my book one word about all that music has meant in my life. How then can I hope to be understood?"[4] (That these are all philosophers Cavell wrote about and cared about shouldn't go unnoticed.) I don't recall when exactly Stanley told me that a highlight of his high school years was playing lead alto sax in an otherwise all-Black jazz band; or when I heard the story of his performing at Berkeley in the premiere of an opera by Roger Sessions during which the English horn player had some mishap and Stanley, seated next to him playing clarinet, transposed and played the English horn solo on the spot; or when he confessed to me late in his teaching career, after the first iteration of his opera course, his nearly unbearable, silent anxiety or fear (somehow traceable to his mother's perfect pitch) that in humming or singing an excerpt from an aria in class he might be reproducing the melody in the wrong key.[5]

Much of Cavell's life with music is confirmed for the world in his philosophical autobiography *Little Did I Know*. The place of that life for Cavell is best captured, to my ear, in the anecdote of what he calls his

"impotent gallantry." On leaving a New Year's Eve party in Greenwich Village as 1948 became 1949, he offered to escort a Black singer-friend to her apartment up in Harlem. Recalling her unease and eventual admonishment as they walked together north of 125th Street—"Don't you see that you are in far greater danger here than I am? Please go back."—Cavell writes, in partial echo of Wittgenstein's despairing remark to Drury: "It had evidently never occurred to me that a black person would not know by looking at me what my life with music had been and therewith comprehend that that life of mine exempted me from participation in the tragedy of racial injustice."[6] It's possible to read the autobiographer here as admonishing his younger and naive Juilliard-student self. (The autobiographer calls his book, after all, *Little Did I Know.*) But on what account? Naivete isn't a philosophical error. Self-ignorance, however, is. What strikes the older Stanley in this memory, I think it's clear, is the younger Stanley's youthful failure to recognize that this crucial aspect of his identity doesn't show itself with every step and breath he takes. It is a gentle, convivial admonishment, the kind that a musico-philosophical mentor might give, smilingly, to a student he or she is fond of.

The numerous scattered anecdotes of Cavell's early musical career in *Little Did I Know* are capped off by an entry on April 10, 2004, describing his eventual realization that he was to leave that career behind—for what exactly, he did not yet know. As his description makes clear, it would take the better part of a lifetime for the leaving to arrive at an end:

> Yet this laborious path to nowhere had, I laboriously came to understand, been essential for me. Music had my whole life been so essentially a part of my days, of what in them I knew was valuable to me, was mine to do, that to forgo it proved to be as mysterious a process of disentanglement as it was to have been awarded it and have nurtured it, eliciting a process of undoing I will come to understand in connection with the work of mourning.[7]

Readers of Cavell may well be surprised by the implication that the concept of mourning, a master tone of Cavell's writing from his reading of Thoreau's *Walden* through his essays on Coleridge and Wordsworth and Emerson's "Experience," should have as one of its originary sites the memory-shock of his leaving his musical life behind.[8] There is no mention of mourning, notably, in Cavell's description of his family's move, just before he turned seven, from the south side of Atlanta to its north side—an event often highlighted (including by me) in discussions of *Little Did I Know*.[9] But mourning will become for Cavell an emblem of the perfectionist work of philosophy itself, which "has to do with the perplexed capacity to mourn the passing of the world."[10] If the emblem of that emblem for Cavell is the abandonment or transformation of his life with music for a life of philosophy, a life dedicated to "the repetitive disinvestment of what has passed,"[11] then Cavell's life with

music and thoughts about the nature of music ought to be revelatory of Cavell's philosophical life and thoughts.

Is that promising too much? It can seem to overlook the simple, undeniable truth that Cavell's musical performance and improvisational and compositional abilities were after all, pretty completely, when all is said and done, *abandoned*. It is also true that the singular musical experience Cavell writes about most often—his composing, while at Berkeley, the incidental music for a student production of *King Lear*—had its greatest impact on him, as he discovered "not without considerable anxiety,"[12] for the thoughts it engendered about Shakespeare's play rather than for the music it drew out of him. But then unsurprisingly, as Cavell acknowledges, what leads him into *Lear*'s world is exactly his writing and rehearsing and conducting this music "in response to the play." My concern, in any event, isn't to resuscitate Cavell the musician (though some amateur recordings of him at the piano improvising on popular songs near the end of his life are, I found on the distracted occasions of my hearing them, intriguing). It is to become even more familiar with the philosopher Cavell that our interest in Cavell the musician matters.

There is a book to be written about Cavell's life with music and its place in his philosophical maturation (even if *Little Did I Know* would seem to satisfy that description).[13] This essay is not that. It is, instead, an interweaving of remarks and reminiscences of Cavell on music that culminate in a reading of his last published pieces devoted to music, primarily "Impressions of Revolution." The claim I mean to test is that such a life, without variation (if with its own ornamentation), takes on a certain character as it finds a home in philosophy from out of its devotion to music. In Cavell's case, his distinctive orientation in philosophy—call this his lifelong coming to terms with his abandoning a life in music—is guided in part by (1) an interest in those moments in experience where words seem to run out, or veer toward nonsense, leaving in their wake touchstones of ecstasy; and (2) an interest in the education of the senses, without which interest we risk their starvation. While each trait is given some elaboration in each of the two sections that follows, I take them up roughly in order.

Music's Ineffability?

I was introduced to the name "Stanley Cavell" by a musician. John Harbison, the American composer and a longtime friend of Cavell since their meeting at Princeton in 1962, was in the summer of 1981 composer-in-residence at the music festival in Santa Fe, where I was an undergraduate at St. John's College. We met up at one point to talk about music and philosophy (I was making plans, despite or because of St. John's classical curriculum,

to write a senior essay on jazz improvisation), and I asked Harbison if he could recommend any contemporary writing on the philosophy of music. That's how I first came to know Cavell's writing voice, a voice I would soon enough learn was indistinguishable from his speaking voice, through the pair of essays Harbison directed me to, "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It."[14]

Seven-and-a-half years later, on leave from my graduate studies at Columbia to spend a year at Harvard,[15] I asked Stanley about musical ineffability. More specifically, I asked whether passages from "Music Discomposed" like the following—passages that picture the scene of exasperation in our trying to explain to someone what we value in some music or other—are depictions of the unsayable:

> [O]ne is anxious to communicate the experience of such objects. […] I want to tell you something I've seen, or heard, or realized, or come to understand, for the reasons for which *such* things are communicated (because it is news, about a world we share, or could). Only I find that I can't *tell* you; and that makes it all the more urgent to tell you. I want to tell you because the knowledge, unshared, is a burden—not, perhaps, the way having a secret can be a burden, or being misunderstood; a little more like the way, perhaps, not being believed is a burden, or not being trusted. […] It matters, there is a burden, because unless I can tell what I know, there is a suggestion (and to myself as well) that I do *not* know. But I *do*—what I see [or hear] is *that* (pointing to the object). But for that to communicate, you have to see [or hear] it too.[16]

I remember asking Stanley my question with some urgency, since I had pressed the same question, possibly only days earlier, over lunch with James Conant—Jim was about to make his philosophical reputation disabusing readers of the *Tractatus* who mistakenly find in it a "hidden teaching" that is "inherently inexpressible"—and he had all but persuaded me that the category of the unsayable was a null set.[17]

Stanley was, I'll say, less resolute than Jim in rejecting my suggestion. Still, my reading was off, and in responding to it he offered what I wanted, a rare and detailed gloss on his first essay on music. Stanley's response—I wrote down the gist of it at the time—carried two lines of thought:

1. He said that part of what he was thinking when he wrote that passage was how the imperative "You have to *hear* it" can discount another's claim to have described what is going on in a piece, even if the other person mouths the same words you would use to say what is going on in it. Cavell's recalling this motive turned my focus to the following two excerpts from the same section (IV) of "Music Discomposed":

> What I know, when I've *seen* or *heard* something is, one may wish to say, not a matter of *merely* knowing it. […] Perhaps "merely knowing"

> should be compared with "not really knowing": "You don't really know what it's like to be a Negro"; "You don't really know how your remark made her feel"; "You don't really know what I mean when I say that Schnabel's slow movements give the impression not of slowness but of infinite length." You merely say the words.[18]

The paragraph goes on to discuss what place knowing *has* in these contexts:

> The issue in each case is: What would *express* this knowledge? It is not that my knowledge will be real, or more than *mere* knowledge, when I acquire a particular feeling, or come to see something. For the issue can also be said to be: What would express the acquisition of that feeling, or show that you have seen the thing? And the answer might be that I now *know* something I didn't know before.[19]

Knowing in these (moral and aesthetic) contexts doesn't have the shape of a proposition to which is added the appropriate grounding or justifying experience; it has a quite different shape. Knowing here is more like cases of sudden recognition ("I know that face," "I know that move") that can change in a flash every element of one's perception.[20] To express *this* knowledge requires that one *give expression to* those features or that gesture, to that sight or sound. In that light, this section of "Music Discomposed" is not so much about what cannot be said or expressed as about what we mean when we say that we know (or see or hear) a something of this sort. What "Music Discomposed" *does* say about expressing this knowledge is contained in a single sentence: "Describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it."[21]

2. Stanley also pointed out, as his teacher J. L. Austin had done, that there is a perfectly trivial sense in which the smell of coffee or the sound of a clarinet,[22] say, can be put into words. (Just like that.)[23]—But those words, of course, standing by themselves, are hardly an expression of knowledge, at least of the kind of knowledge we are tempted to declare beyond words. *Expressing* what we know—or showing it, Tractarian-wise—comes easier in some matters than in others.

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AND YET: CAVELL RECOUNTS early in *Little Did I Know* a peculiar gesture of his mother's that seems to serve him as a touchstone for what one might well call music's expressible-but-unsayable aspects—"the great secrets," he writes, "I knew I craved to have" and that his musically gifted mother "seemed to divine."[24] The instance he reports occurred at a recital by the great violinist Fritz Kreisler, for which Stanley (aged ten or eleven) traveled with his mother to San Francisco from their home in Sacramento. At various moments during the recital, particularly at the ends of each of

Kreisler's encores, his mother would "suddenly produce (a gesture I knew well and would glory in when directed to something I had done) an all but inaudible high cry and silently snap the fingers of her hand nearer me and thrust it toward her face, which was turned as if to ward off a blow."[25] (Is there an epistemology that gives us a complete account of this species of knowing, a knowing that is neither propositional nor a mere familiarity nor a knowing-how?) If you were to attempt to translate or reduce Stanley's mother's gesture to words—"It is obviously an expression of approval"; "It means, in effect, 'exactly right'"—you would thereby invite the response, "But you have to *hear* it." Part of what that command expresses, we will see, is an awareness that music-making is itself already a kind of saying (for those who have ears to hear). The point is alluded to in Cavell's description of what he took away from Kreisler's playing that day:

> There was a way he stood listening when the piano was playing a solo passage, especially I suppose in a slow movement, his head and body absolutely still, which I retain as an image of total concentration, ending in a single unhurried gesture that brought the violin back beneath the chin and the bow back to the strings at the instant of the violin's next entrance—as if music had been induced to utter itself.[26]

I grant that the "as if" here ("as if music had been induced to utter itself") matters, as the modifier "a kind of" does in my description of music-making as "a kind of saying." But just as the suggestion of a link between music and speech is an ancient and seemingly innocuous one, so is it neither flippant nor mere analogy, not peculiar to Kreisler's somewhat singular and memorable preparation before an entrance. (I clarify or forge the link between music and speech that I associate with Cavell below.)

Words appear to run out at other moments and in other contexts. Twice in *Little Did I Know*, having said all that seems fitting about a particularly striking experience, Cavell is left sensing that not enough has been said to fully convince his reader, and he concludes by simply affirming his conviction, but without any fear that he has thereby undermined it. I am struck by where these moments occur. Taken in tandem, they appear to link the mysteries of sexual awakening and musical ecstasy. The first—in which, admittedly, the moment of wordless knowing is somewhat whimsical—concerns the unspoken connection that the not quite seven-year-old Stanley felt between himself and "a girl of crushing beauty" nearly twice his age who, like him, appeared in a children's talent review in Indian dress, but not before appearing before him backstage undressed:

> I think that is what I saw, although it took some time for me to understand that she had taken off really all of her clothes, upon which recognition I was propelled from the room by an invisible force of nature, something

> like a consuming wave of aromatic mist. […] I tried once or twice during the ensuing week of two shows a day to interest this mythical being in the cosmic fact that we were both Indian royalty, by leaving my costume on and stationing myself by the stairs down to the men's dressing room until she walked off the stage and had a chance to remark the closeness of our connection. Evidently I had failed to place myself in clear enough view for that. But I knew what I knew, and it was satisfactory.[27]

The second occasion concerns the particular, polished, professional sound of the all-Black (except for a guitarist and himself) rehearsal jazz band of the saxophonist–composer Harrel Wiley, in which the fifteen-year-old Stanley played the lead alto saxophone, a band he claims could rival the sound of the best jazz bands of its day:

> When he counted off the tempo for a downbeat the ensuing force of sound was so strong that I feared the house could not withstand it, and I was so thrilled by it that I felt I could barely continue playing. […] Everything we played that morning […] was an original composition of Wiley's, not simply an arrangement; and the ideas were more advanced than any I had heard outside of the Ellington band. […] I can readily imagine that someone will think my story remembering our sound in Wiley's arrangements for his black band, as it were invoking comparison with the Basie band of that era, belongs on the side of the delusional. I have to say that on somber reflection I do not really or fully believe that. I place it among those experiences of my life about which I am moved to say: I know what I know.[28]

Finding these passages in a philosophical autobiography called *Little Did I Know*, the reader is all but required to consider how it is that "I know what I know" ("I knew what I knew") says what it does, avoiding triviality.

We can grant that Cavell's story of a secret connection to the Indian princess registers little more than a child's impression, and that the majesty of Wiley's band (absent recorded evidence) is no better than an impression. Given that, the absence of further words, while understandable, can seem protective, even dismissive of doubt, as if the book's title meant, "Little did I know, but I knew *this*." For a different understanding of these invocations of "I know what I know," we should compare them to a remark in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* to which Cavell often turns. In it, Wittgenstein gives voice to that moment in any explanation of my apparent certainties (e.g., in following a rule) when my justifications appear exhausted: "I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"[29] Cavell (reading Wittgenstein) interprets the one so inclined not as dismissing the questioner or voicing despair over the possibility of communication, but as holding that inclination in check, perhaps through

an awareness of what our understanding each other, after all, rests on.[30] Taking a cue from Cavell's reading, I want to suggest that "I know what I know" in these passages is not intended by Cavell to silence doubters or to mark where words end, as if out of a false self-certainty or conviction in what he knows. Rather, he employs these words to flag a memory, to draw our attention to it, and to acknowledge where a next question must lead—namely, further down the path of such incandescent experiences. In the wake of these recaptured memories, in other words, words do not come to an end out of necessity, as if in the presence of something ineffable. They simply stop, awaiting the impulse to more speech (whether from himself or, in reading, from his reader). Any continuation calls not for proof but for something like a willing attentiveness. (It may require, for instance, further imagining oneself as an almost seven-year-old boy positioned by the stairs, trying to see thereby the connection between oneself and a mythical being whose aura has the power to command one's thoughts.)

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WHAT I TAKE TO BE CULMINATING THOUGHTS on the burden borne by words and their failure appear in Cavell's aforementioned late essay on music, "Impressions of Revolution."[31] There the sense of our failure to articulate—or more exactly, to conceptualize—what we hear in music draws inspiration from Walter Benjamin's mid-1920s work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*). In this study of German baroque tragedy (*Trauerspiel* literally means "mourning-play"), Benjamin declares at one point that "the spoken word [as opposed to music on the one hand, and written language on the other] is only afflicted by meaning, so to speak, as if by an inescapable disease" so that "meaning is encountered, and will continue to be encountered as the reason for mournfulness," and that "the phonetic tension with speech in the language of the seventeenth century leads directly to music, the opposite of meaning-laden speech."[32] Cavell ties these remarks to his long-posited idea that what is known as philosophical skepticism is fueled by our alternating fear of and wish for inexpressiveness. He then offers this succinct summary of Benjamin's claim and its resonance with his own: "Music allows the achieving of understanding without meaning, that is to say, without the articulation of individual acts of reference on which intelligibility is classically thought to depend."[33] I find in this formulation or epigram a guide for clarifying not only Cavell's thinking about music but the place of musical experience in his thinking about the expressibility of words.

The picture of human understanding ungrounded in individual acts of reference is more than reminiscent of the picture of language that emerges from Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. In that picture, our ability to speak to one another, and to understand one another, does not rest in some fact

of language or some fact about a world that our words attach to, as the philosophical tradition to which Wittgenstein is responding argues. Cavell notes elsewhere that the effort to apply the traditional picture to concepts of experience—Wittgenstein "remembers someone striking himself on the breast in the heat of a philosophical discussion, crying out, 'No one else can have THIS pain'"—only appears to make sense if the referring term ("THIS") remains mysteriously unspecified, "an absolute demonstrative absolutely pointing to an absolute object."[34] Absent such absolute connections, understanding happens, and it happens in a world whose actual mystery we overlook. To give the merest indication of Wittgenstein's picture of that mystery: understanding happens through the human ways or forms of life that we inhabit and find ourselves attuned to, and that we also find ourselves desiring (broadly speaking)—ways or forms of life into which we are inaugurated together with language, and that enable language to work on us and to move us (broadly speaking).

But Cavell's epigram is explicitly characterizing music, not language. And it draws its inspiration from Benjamin, who had implied a contrast between music's happier expressivity and that of (spoken) words, which are "afflicted by meaning," "meaning-laden speech" being "the reason for mournfulness." That is, Benjamin's concern is with, not a grief brought on by our words falling short of capturing our experience, but the grief and mourning that follows from speech itself. What we say, we must mean. And yet, what I do with my grief or mourning, my attitude toward words, is not spelled out in this extract from Benjamin's text.

As I read "Impressions of Revolution," we should take "the achieving of understanding without meaning" to be as instructive of the workings of language as it is of music. Cavell is suggesting that we ask: What happens if we let go of the idea that the primary fact of communication is that words carry meanings (fixed by something beyond what we bring to and show in our conversing), or the idea—more to the point—that my understanding you rests on my associating your words with objects in the world, and similar feats of absolute translation? We might, with Cavell, rethink the following analogy, pitched by someone bearing a life with music: "Understanding a sentence is much more like understanding a theme in music than one might believe" (Wittgenstein's words, quoted by Cavell in the penultimate paragraph of "Impressions of Revolution.")[35] Wittgenstein continues: "Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in intensity and tempo [in a musical theme, or in its performance]? One would like to say: 'Because I know what it all means.' But what does it mean? I'd not be able to say."[36] The sense of Wittgenstein's remark, and of Cavell's interest in quoting it (he counts it among the "revolutionary" things Wittgenstein has to say about "the nature of our agreement in speech"),[37] is not to mark where the ineffable or unfathomable enter into our understanding of a musical theme or a sentence. The point is rather to underscore a fact of unending surprise, that

"the impress produced in you by things as they pass and abiding in you when they have passed"[38]—that is, your attending, in just these surroundings, with whatever relation you bear to them, and with what has gone before, to just this tone and mood—is the necessary but sufficient condition that structures our understanding (or our failing to understand) one another. As Cavell puts this thought elsewhere:

> The very invocation of the understanding of a musical theme as a guide to philosophical understanding, among the reorientations in this traumatic breakthrough of philosophical imagination, call it the promise of an understanding without meanings, is a utopian glimpse of a new, or undiscovered, relation to language, to its sources in the world, to its means of expression.[39]

> Understanding a sentence is hearing the music that shapes its life.[40]

And so similarly, my capacity to mourn the passing of the world (as of time, or a friend and mentor, or the fact of meaning-laden speech itself) does not depend on something fixed in speech or in the world to which I might still return, but is akin to my ability to follow a musical theme without losing the thread.

Animated Hearing

Something that the aforementioned moments of heightened awareness appear to teach the young Stanley as we come to know him in *Little Did I Know*, moments that are mostly occasioned by music (his mother's divining secrets from Fritz Kreisler's playing; the consuming wave of aromatic mist associated with a girl of crushing beauty who, incidentally, would sing "Indian Love Call"; the force of sound of Wiley's band; the "exhilarating enterprise"[41] of composing a musical response to *Lear*), is the recognition that our lives seem to transpire on the brink of ecstasy. Granted, this is not quite a fact, something the recognition of which we can gain by being told. To that extent it is like the recognition of the later Wittgenstein's new method, the understanding of which can't be gained simply by reading Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical remarks, but depends on "the work of changing one's way of looking at things, durch lange Übung [through long practice]."[42] What I am calling Cavell's life "out" of music is the vital source of his understanding of what lies ecstatically next to this life. To understand that a human life contains the possibility of such experiences, and so to try to understand why we might become numb to that possibility, is part of what makes Cavell the philosopher he is. Music is a natural site for this understanding, as one can read in the conclusion to "Impressions

of Revolution": "What is at stake here I could perhaps summarize or epitomize this way: The emptiness of the world […] is to be filled by music, conceived as its willingness to accept assignments of meaning and its power to transcend all its assignments."[43] Here the experience of music as inviting words but transcending all proffered meaning is offered as an experience to be craved, and in the face of which we might exclaim, "Words fail me." (Cavell will come to read the task of the critic to articulate this experience as an instance of a mode of expression he calls "passionate utterance.")[44]

And so several of Cavell's anecdotes about his life with music are to be understood not simply as reports, but as requiring or inviting the reader to share in the (described) experience, as if only in that way can one begin to see the philosophical import of a moment of heightened awareness—begin to see "why philosophy, of a certain ambition, tends perpetually to intersect the autobiographical."[45] These anecdotes are (again) not instances of the inexpressible, but rather locales where an attentive or receptive reader can arrive at the edge of ecstasy with an exercise of imagination. I have in mind such moments in Cavell's text as the following.

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CAVELL DESCRIBES HOW, when he was about to turn thirteen, he and his mother and two relatives traveled to the 1939 World's Fair in San Francisco. Shortly after they passed through the gates, Stanley heard over the Fair's sound system the Benny Goodman band performing their theme song. In 1939, for a young fan of Benny Goodman, hearing this familiar song broadcast for the Fair visitors would have been both pleasing and unremarkable given the band's popularity. And then, a few minutes further along the entering path, Stanley found himself at the back of a large crowd facing an outdoor bandstand,

> on which the actual Benny Goodman band was playing what we were hearing over the loudspeaker, and as Goodman raised his clarinet for a new entrance, it was not a perfect repetition but a slight variation of something that had become a part of my brain. An ecstasy enclosed me (as if what had only existed for me as sound had of itself materialized on the instant) […]. I saw a seat open near where we were standing and motioned to my mother that I was staying there. […] To consider leaving the music of the spheres for a glimpse of earthly innovations seemed unthinkable to me.[46]

Cavell's characterization of this sudden and striking and animating aspect shift ("as if what had only existed for me as sound had of itself materialized on the instant") might best be understood by recalling cinematic efforts at forging similar moments. Think of the palette transformation from sepia

to glorious Technicolor at the moment when Dorothy opens the front door to her newly uprooted house in *The Wizard of Oz*, released the same year as Stanley's visit to the World's Fair. A more recent and direct parallel is the Greek chorus of bandsmen in *Woman at War* (2018), whose music we hear at the opening simply as movie soundtrack and then, as the film's heroine runs across the Icelandic highlands and the credits roll, the camera pans not only to follow her but to reveal three musicians and their instruments (harmonium, tuba, drums) out on the highlands in the near distance behind her, creating the soundtrack in real time. Or again, consider the early, farcical moment in *Blazing Saddles* (1974), when the newly appointed Black sheriff is seen riding on horseback across the arid Wild West accompanied, somewhat incongruously, by a famous big band arrangement of "April in Paris." In a moment of cinematic audacity, he rides up to where the entire Count Basie band is seated on a band stage, surrounded by sagebrush and playing the scene's musical background, now gloriously foregrounded.

If I were to further multiply these illustrations of when something familiar or established or recorded comes shockingly to life, it might tempt us to look for a common feature, as if what is being illustrated is a particular technique, a method for making the mundane vivid. But in telling this tale from memory, Cavell is not especially interested in the mere fact of vividness. He wants to convey an *impression*—hoping thereby to conjure some such impression from our own (cinematic or other) experience—so as to make intelligible the (philosophical) insight that followed from it. Here is how he first words that insight:

> To hear the familiar arrangements played live, with inevitable and enlivening alterations in the improvisations, confirmed for me as it were the knowledge of existence, in the form of, or a prophecy of, the reality of happiness. Whatever unanticipated forms the prophecy will recognize, and however many awakenings may be necessary from my coma, I had received proof of a world beyond me.[47]

In this instance, the proto-philosopher's proof of an external world is not effected by a Cartesian medley of the *cogito*, an honest god, and a new method for testing impressions. Rather, it arrives when "something that had become a part of my brain" is revealed to have an unfrozen, ongoing existence ("played *live*, with inevitable and enlivening alterations in the improvisations")—an intriguing template, possibly a definition, of happiness. Let us assume—it seems a safe bet—that this was the young Stanley's first time hearing the Goodman band in person, and take note that he writes, "my fascination with Goodman's playing […] was the background of my mounting craving to learn the clarinet."[48] If some such consummate experience is what it takes to awaken Cavell or any of us from the cerebral coma of our adolescence, then it is not surprising that we may find ourselves

experiencing a related shock of recognition when Cavell the philosopher proposes that the home of skepticism, and the source of the modern wish for stability in our convictions, is our felt disappointment with the world. He speaks of this condition as "the unappeasable human dissatisfaction with each of life's dispensations, the condition I have called 'human restlessness,'" and not surprisingly, he finds this intuition revelatory of some late moments in Mahler.[49]

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THAT IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY, however, or of the felt aftershock of this particular musical encounter. An intervening memory recorded in the next entry of *Little Did I Know*—drawn from shortly after Stanley turns thirteen and involving, once again, the inadvertent sighting of an older, "extravagantly beautiful," unclothed female—offers Cavell an occasion to note, within the experience of ecstasy, "the pain within joy, not alone the pain of delay, or say, detour, but the pain within the sheer extremity of experience. […] [It is an experience] of the body's insufficiency to house the materialization of its desire." He then confirms, "This was evident in my response to the Goodman band […]."[50] Here we have a more developed emblem of the moment when familiar sounds give way to improvisatory variations right before one's ears. The pain within joy comes about not because the body seeks, and fails to find, a way to materialize its desire (the body being insufficient to house it on its own), but because the material representation of its desire (the Goodman band creating the music right there, on stage, "as if what had only existed for me as sound had of itself materialized on the instant") is not the desire itself, and so frustrates even as it exhilarates. The body can't house a *materialization* of its desire; desire alone, inchoate, is the (proper) occupant of its house.

To see uncathected desire as desirable, as not just an element of the human condition to be appeased but as its promise, is one of a handful of differences in outlook between Cavell and Freud.[51] That this experience of uncontained joy is necessarily joined by pain might name the difference in outlook between Cavell's and Kant's views of the sublime. But what deserves underscoring in the continuation of this passage is Cavell's explicit claim that music in its exemplary instances (counting, at least, "great jazz" and "the works, in the other realm of [Western classical] music, that I at the same time loved extravagantly, to the point of pain") is the site where the unappeasable, painful side of ecstatic experience recurs time and again. Cavell offers as illustration of the inexhaustibility of "this fact of music" the secondary theme of the Chopin Nocturne in G major (Op. 37, No. 2), and—exceeding it in expressiveness, as Cavell asserts without argument—the similarly lilting, dotted rhythm, triple time diatonic theme for the set of variations in the second and final movement of Beethoven's final piano

sonata (Op. 111). Both are simple melodies, surrounded at first by relatively simple accompaniment. And yet hearing them in their broader surroundings (Chopin's running thirds and sixths of the opening theme; the greater tumult and drama of Opus 111's first movement), the melodies (especially the latter) are, stupefyingly, as weighty and pregnant as certain silences. (Just as with Cavell's readings of individual moments in movies, one needs to go back to a performance, or imagine the sounds here, to hear Cavell's point. Nothing less than that uptake of the sounds can or should count as justification of his claim. Of course, this goes hand in hand with that other fact of music, that any given uptake for any given person may not work, may not instantiate the extremity of experience. Cavell's illustrations are not wholly random, however. Or so I attest.) This entry in *Little Did I Know* closes with a final image of the inexhaustibility of the experience of pain-in-desire. Cavell takes note—as he did a few years earlier in "Impressions of Revolution"[52]—of the incessantly repeated C major triad that concludes Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. He reads the repetitions (covering nearly thirty measures) as signaling not triumph, but Beethoven's uncertainty about endings, his unwillingness to declare the ending as an end, or perhaps his unwillingness to conceive that there should be any experience after this music has ended.

And now consider how such a lesson lends itself to or imparts further lessons of human experience: of the idea that the quest of moral perfectionism, living for one's next self, begins with the painful (or at least, not pleasant) sense of disgust with one's present self, with one's life as it stands. Or that the task of a life is to learn how to mourn each passing, commonplace moment properly. Or that "the human intuition of what Empson calls (and what Adorno calls) 'the insufficiency of existence'" is what the pastoral, whether in poetry or in music, is concerned to ameliorate.[53] It really does not take poetry—though it may take a good live recording—to recognize how the Benny Goodman band's unexpected materialization could guide, as a persistent memory, such lines of thought.

Those lines extend to include the following, written some thirty-eight years after Cavell received at the World's Fair his prophesy of the reality of happiness, but a good ten years before he began to align this vision with the tradition of moral perfectionism:

> That to be human is to have, or to risk having, this capacity to wish; that to be human is to wish, and in particular to wish for a completer identity than one has so far attained; and that such a wish may project a complete world *opposed* to the world one so far shares with others: this is a way of taking up the cause of Shakespearean Romance.[54]

A kind of Shakespearean romance is at work in what I count as the most significant feature in Cavell's telling of his "mounting craving to learn the clarinet," a craving he ties explicitly to his desire to overcome his social

isolation—his conviction that he "belonged in no place"—and so to his desire for a completer identity than he had so far attained. He mentions the feature twice: he would transcribe (copy down) Goodman's and Artie Shaw's clarinet improvisations from their recordings, a familiar but not universal practice for budding jazz musicians.[55] The time-consuming task of transcribing solos by ear from (at the time) 78 rpm flat disc records, setting the needle down to play short stretches over and over to catch every nuance, "memorizing" and then "imitating" the improvisations, is the wish for, as I might put it, the fullest, exemplary expression of one's understanding of the music one is moved by. The expression reaches its apotheosis not in a description of what one has learned about the solo after the transcribing is done, but in the effort to then play the solo from the *inside*. That is, what the expression of one's understanding demands, as is revealed soon enough to the transcriber–performer and in that sense is internal to the practice, is that one should shift one's efforts from imitation (sounding like) to internalization (sounding out), from what the listener hears to how the performer is thinking, and so to developing one's own vocabulary and voice so as to make the sounds dance.[56] In Cavell's telling, this productive and transformative exercise is joined in his memory with his fanciful drawing of various decorative music stands that would announce to the world the big band he would be leading to musical exceptionality. Cavell sees, in this adolescent fantasy, "I hope with some tenderness, my bursting hopes for wings with which to express myself in the showy form they took of privilege in a perfectly expressive society of artistry."[57] Thus for Cavell, the practice and the fantasy of total expressiveness as a way to combat his awkward isolation in adolescence took form in these preparations for a life of jazz performance.

The other bit of Cavell's ecstasy tinged with pain, both adolescent and performative, in his gradually realized life as the leader of his high school jazz band came about because he and his band (which, unlike Wiley's band, "was not wonderful") were now indispensable to that school's social life, even as he was prohibited, sitting up on the bandstand, from participating in full sociability.[58] Cavell describes the virtues of this circumstance both negatively—as the blessing of averting perplexity and humiliation (he was younger than his classmates, could not yet drive, and was not outgoing, so that attending the dance would have meant his swift defeat)—and positively: "Leading the band annulled this painful dilemma at the first downbeat. I did not attend the dance; I was the dance."[59]

I take it that we are to hear, in Cavell's identifying his performing in the dance with the dance itself, the well-known closing line from Yeats' "Among School Children" that Cavell had dissected years earlier: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"[60] In his discussion of this line, Cavell (in contrast to Paul de Man in his "Semiology and Rhetoric") proposes that we hear Yeats' question as asking not for a difference (How can we *tell*

dancer from dance) but for knowledge, or more exactly, acknowledgment (How can we *know the dancer*, either by means of her dance or apart from her dance). And so in *Little Did I Know*, speaking of the young Stanley performing up there on the stage, Cavell presses the fact of this youngster's unappreciated or unacknowledged expression: Since he was not, could not be, on the dance floor,

> the music was not played for me—except in those instances when, in my disdain, I knew that I was playing better than anyone else present would know, hence in a sense playing for myself, perhaps in a way that made no contribution to the communal effort. What, then, would it be like if the best I could propose came to be recognized as essential to some such effort?[61]

This is the dilemma of musical performance—something requiring extremity in the act but not in its reception—which matches the dilemma of the aficionado, who wants to say what she hears in a performance but faces the threat of not being trusted or believed. The inevitable but still surprising failure of communion, of a shared response, in the presence of the very same stimuli or "facts" about the world, has obvious political importance. (From "The Politics of Interpretation": "Apart from my passion in the dance, my perception is no longer transfigured: Who am I (are we) to take such perception as valid?")[62] That there will be different understandings of the same event, of what counts as the "facts," is of course the lifeblood of moral discourse. (Was it a slap or a slug?) But the *essential* presence of passion in performance, whether in me as audience or in her as performer ("Apart from the other's passion in the dance, the other is no longer transfigured: Is this the one who was there?")[63] is paramount here. If you fail to see it or hear it, that can seem to me as absurd as your failing to notice that the room in which we're conversing has burst into flames.

Here is where skepticism can find a home in a life born out of music, and particularly in the life of a performing musician, even as those on the dance floor greet you as human and navigate their way through doorways and generally, if carelessly or without a care, show themselves accepting of the world and of others in it. That the doubt about our sharing a world should arise so naturally here is no doubt a function of the fact that (to return to Cavell's formula) musical understanding proceeds in the absence of meaning. The blessed truth of music—"the opposite of meaning-laden speech"—is its ontological curse. But then, if musical understanding is rightly taken as the model for sentential understanding, it is unsurprising that we are all cursed, whether we tend to open our mouths to sing or to speak.

* * * *

A FINAL, CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT MEMORY of musical discovery recounted by Cavell in *Little Did I Know*—important for what becomes of the philosopher Stanley Cavell—is tied, surely not accidentally, to his discovery of Freud. As Cavell all but says, it was Freud who filled the void created in his life by his recognition that he was not to be a professional musician. What Freud offered was an answer to the unknown and unacknowledged performer on the bandstand:

> After my consciousness, or I can say the fact, of parting from the imagination of a future for me in the world of music, my reading turned for some time fairly exclusively to reading Freud. […] I looked forward to each of my sessions of reading Freud's texts as to falling into a kind of trance of absorption and a security of being known, accepted back into the human race.[64]

This memory of welcoming acceptance is then linked to the allure of certain apartment buildings that Stanley would walk past along Central Park West, several exhibiting metal name signs of doctors (or as he imagined, psychoanalysts) offering an emblem of "settled adulthood," of "human beings in command of an orderly existence."[65] It is from the authoritative occupant of one of these "celestial fortresses" that Stanley would take a lesson not only in the blurring of the high and the low (the celestial and the terrestrial) in the arts, but in having his hearing turned around—or as he will say, upside down.

This occupant, who was a relative of an acquaintance of Stanley's, an acquaintance who invited Stanley over to this man's Central Park West residence early in 1949, knew that Stanley was enrolled at Juilliard and subsequently learned of his affection for and experience in swing bands. Thus prompted, the man

> began reminiscing about the time he had invited the Benny Goodman band to be introduced on his radio program. "They turned out to have no opening theme, so I told Benny to make a swing version of *Invitation to the Dance*. […] He kept it as his opening theme song from then on."[66]

For Stanley, the audacity of this man's assertion was twofold. He was proposing that he was the catalyst for "sounds that had existed from all eternity" (the foxtrot "Let's Dance," Goodman's theme song since the mid-1930s, the song Stanley had heard transfigured when he stumbled across the Goodman band performing it live at the San Francisco World's Fair a decade earlier). And he was claiming that Goodman's piece was a transcription or arrangement of Carl Maria von Weber's *Invitation to the Dance* of 1819, a musical genealogy that made no sense to Stanley—not for implying that

"Let's Dance" was yet another instance of "jazzing the classics" but because the two themes bore no obvious relation to each other.

But then, riding the elevator down from this man's apartment and imagining the Goodman theme's opening bars in his head,

> I recognized that I had always heretofore, with evidently willful shallowness, heard the Goodman band's delivery of the tune upside down […]. When in the past I had found myself syllabifying the Goodman theme, […] it was uniformly the ornamental, jagged figure for the trumpets I reproduced […]. But underneath that activity, grounding it, the saxophones, sure enough now in my remembered hearing […] are playing, as it were calmly, the Weber tune, no longer in three-quarter waltz time, and at about half the velocity of the tempo in which you would expect to hear the tune.[67]

The particular feeling that this discovery produced in Stanley at the time was "chagrin," lessened only by the thought that the connection between the Weber waltz and the Goodman theme song surely went unrecognized by virtually everyone else who bore his classical and swing band devotions.[68] Yet while "the sense of revelation would remain present" even if the Weber–Goodman connection were widely known, the chagrin "in recognizing one's injustices to works, as to persons, that matter to one's life, or cross its paths," would remain. Here again is a memory that joins ecstasy with pain, Proust-like, or like a revelatory insight in psychoanalytic treatment that one may be undergoing. At this moment in *Little Did I Know*, it becomes the exemplar of something Cavell chooses to call "philosophical experience":

> The pain so often accompanying an influx of knowledge, exquisitely in the mode of coming to understand what one cannot simply have failed to know is, I suppose, a minor curse upon intellectual vanity […]. But how could I have known then that this overturning of false assumption by a reversal of listening was a model of philosophical experience? Exactly.[69]

Here ("But how could I have known … ?") is a better emblem for how to read this memoir's title, *Little Did I Know*. A life, prior to its opening to philosophy, is littered with experiences, ecstatic songs, that in retrospect you may come to recognize as inviting you to cross from the life you were leading to a life whose questions you can find yourself happy to be led by.

But what in this particular experience invites exactly *philosophy*, beyond its exhibiting the Platonic feature of engendering the discovery of one's ignorance?

Begin by considering its musical provenance. Humans aren't typically occupied or preoccupied with ambiguous figures like the duck–rabbit or the Necker cube, yet these figures dominate discussions of aspect–reversals,

whether within or outside the context of Wittgenstein's aspect-seeing remarks.[70] On the other hand, many lives are occupied with, even devoted to, music. And a true characterization of musical experience at a certain level of complexity (even at an elementary level) is that our attention is *variously* attracted to features of seemingly equal, or at least arguably equal, interest. To indicate one broad range of examples: the never-ending mystery of contrapuntal music is that we can hear distinguishable and even contrasting lines or voices simultaneously which (unlike the voices of people talking over one another) *make sense* together; and we can attend to one voice, or to the other voice, or to their co-sounding. (This is a distinctive feature of the inexhaustible fascination with different performances of the same musical work, in which, say, one performer brings out a counter-voice that another chooses to underplay.) Music is, in its aspirations, an ambiguous or aspectual construct for the ear's attention. And as with any aspectual phenomenon, one aspect tends to obscure or deafen us to others. But that is an anthropomorphic description. What hides one voice is not the other voice, but my choosing (or my being chosen—the degree of freedom here is obscure) to attend to it, perhaps for a lifetime, or at least whenever I hear it.[71]

Now see this state of affairs in our relation to music as an image of philosophical thinking. What, in Cavell's retelling of his "reversal of listening," brought the reversal about, turning it into "a model of philosophical experience"? A not unimportant feature is that Cavell portrays himself as initially *resistant to believing* that a reversal of listening was possible. This undoubtedly had something to do with his understanding of himself as musically astute, which the preceding pages of his autobiography lay out. (Recall his declaration that "music had my whole life been so essentially a part of my days, of what in them I knew was valuable to me, was mine to do.")[72] His resistance also seems linked to his transparent antipathy to this resident of Central Park West's "rebuking richness," someone whom he describes at the crucial moment simply as "this man," one "no different from the members of my father's generation whom I would have met at the Jewish Progressive Club"; the man's claim "was not a rational proposition."[73] (Then why return to it in thought? What to Stanley does this man represent? His father in a parallel, more luxurious and just universe? The author of *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*?) The encounter is soon enough followed, however, by a moment of solitude in a descending elevator, a "clear stretch of free time" (*Meditations* I) when, Cavell says, he was "left to my own thoughts."[74] But Stanley's exercise of thought is not spent raising doubts about the man's trustworthiness or constructing a counter-argument to his claim or, for that matter, drawing a lesson about his own fallibility (yet). He uses his solitude as an opportunity to *imagine the sounds* of the Goodman theme song, to

> go over in my head deliberately the then still famous opening bars of the arrangement that Goodman used of his opening theme song, something I

> might have done, without deliberation [or prompting], in a certain mood on any number of unremarkable days.[75]

And so it happens that all of a sudden—for this reader of Freud and future reader of Proust, remembering the nature of big band arranging "that I had already surmised" (namely, that the reed instruments take the lead) but in this instance had been "persisting dumbly in turning a deaf ear to"—Stanley hears the melody and the accompaniment of "Let's Dance," the leader and the follower, switch roles in his imagination, and "sure enough now" he hears the Weber waltz in it.[76] Cavell has undergone an auditory aspect shift of some significance, and it proves to be an awakening of philosophy as much as a lesson in listening.

* * * *

IF "LET'S DANCE"—a once wildly popular tune that every American of a certain age and predilection would recognize—could contain an overlooked revelation, a possibility of rehearing that overturned what one took to be the main idea (that is, the theme) and that linked this tune to a different era and a different sensibility, then, really, what is there in experience that one is willing to chance overlooking? What I just mentioned as Stanley's taking the opportunity "to *imagine the sounds*" of the Goodman tune is a version of the critical guidance that Cavell will offer in virtually every one of his readings of works for the theater (including Shakespeare) and of film; it also identifies what is required to employ successfully the procedures of J. L. Austin and of ordinary language philosophy generally.[77] Imagining the sounds is not a poor substitute for *hearing* the sounds; it is, rather, a name for or the activity of a certain kind of reflection, as it were after the fact. If one thinks of the effort to imagine the sounds as an effort that combines the skills of reception and of humility or sympathy, and so skills of criticism and morality, one is soon led to question why we may fail to cultivate these abilities, or choose to withhold them on this or another occasion, or fail to be grateful for them when directed at us; and so one may find oneself drawn, as Cavell is, to questions of skepticism and acknowledgment. (Cavell's discussion of what he calls empathic projection, in relation to skepticism about other minds, leads to the idea that human faces *always* present aspects to be struck by; or better: to the idea that our life with human creatures always invites an animated seeing—and equally to the idea that it invites a refusal of the implications of that seeing.)[78]

And now read "Understanding a sentence is much more like understanding a theme in music than one might believe" in light of this story of a revelation in hearing. Wittgenstein's and Cavell's revelations of language ask that one pay attention to "the voice which says [particular words], and through that to the phenomenology of the straits of mind in which only those words said

in that order will suffice," since "in philosophy it is the sound which makes all the difference."[79] We should notice, however, that while the direction to imagine the sounds is key to understanding a sentence, the causal connection between *Invitation to the Dance* and "Let's Dance" is hardly a model for discovering and articulating one's *understanding* of a stretch of music. First, the connection between the two tunes is, as one might say, too literal. The musical connection is rather like Sancho Panza's story about his kinsmen who pronounced on a certain wine that it had a taste of leather and iron, and were then "proven right" when its containing barrel was found to have a leather thong and key at the bottom of it. As Cavell says in countering Hume's reading of this anecdote, the story is no evidence of the kinsmen's critical skills (of either discernment or expression), since a key made of iron is not a *taste* of iron, and the critic's vindication "comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there."[80] And second, while discovering the genealogy of "Let's Dance" undoubtedly plays a role in *how* I hear it—not least if I discover it *in* hearing it—you would not want to say, if I merely mention the connection to *Invitation to the Dance*, that I have shown that I *understand* "Let's Dance." (For what if I then go on to tap my foot squarely on the first and third beats of this swing tune as I listen to it? What if I waltz to it?) Showing that one understands a theme in music is much more like doing something (even gesturing with one's words, as the good critic does) than it is like asserting something.

For a better model of musical understanding, we should return, finally, to "Impressions of Revolution." Earlier I highlighted Cavell's formulation that "music allows the achieving of understanding without meaning." But as he goes on to say:

> If the idea of "understanding without meaning" is to do real work, then we will have to specify the range of procedures that would *show* understanding [a musical analysis, a narrative, a performance, etc.] […] and articulate both why we want to, and how it is possible to, relate this apparent motley of procedures to something like addressing meaning, when so obviously whatever meaning they discover is so different from knowing or discovering the meaning of a word or a sentence in speech.[81]

Cavell offers, as examples of how we "*show* understanding" in music, two complementary but contrasting responses to a late stretch in the "Funeral March" of Beethoven's Eroica Symphony. An unnamed panelist at the conference where "Impressions of Revolution" was presented had likened a passage of back-and-forth eighth notes (beginning at mm. 209ff.) to the tick/tock of a clock, "suggesting that time is running, running out." Cavell, hearing the violins here as too low and slow to suggest a clock, offers that it is "closer to rob/rub, more say like a labored heartbeat, suggesting life running out." He concludes that both responses can be taken as exhibiting

an understanding of this passage and its role and import at this moment of this impressively long slow movement. But how is that possible, given the evident differences between a mechanism and a human being?

> [T]he fact that both seem to me apt implies that they are to be thought of not as discoveries but as *impressions* and *assignments* of meaning. The philosophical task here then becomes one of showing that this reformulation is not an evasion of the question of meaning in music, but constitutes the beginning of an answer to the question.[82]

What Cavell implies in saying that these expressions of understanding are not "discoveries" about Beethoven's Funeral March is simply that understanding this stretch of music is not a matter of discerning or otherwise learning Beethoven's thinking or feeling, learning what was going on in his head or, as it were, heart as he wrote it. (What other candidate referent could satisfy the fantasy of *discovering* the music's meaning?)[83]

But this beginning of an answer doesn't lead Cavell to the idea that these and other descriptions of music, "*impressions* … of meaning," are *mere* impressions in a realm of human experience where anything goes. There are two reasons why not. First, when I describe a stretch of music, my description is one not only that I might find apt but that *you* might also; and I care as much that my impression can be shared with you (or with someone) as that I have it. And second, that I *have* this impression (or another more or less articulate, or even possibly inarticulable) is what music that I care about and that occupies my life seems to *require* of me. To listen closely to music and be left with no impression would be a bit like listening to someone speak to you in a language that you don't understand—except that, of course, *that* experience might still leave you with a quite particular impression.[84] Here as elsewhere in his later writings, Cavell is reclaiming with Emerson the concept of "impression" from the Empiricist tradition. Instead of an impression as a more or less mechanical and so determined imprint that sensory objects leave behind in their wake, to speak of "*impressions* … of meaning" is to recognize my life with things (or here, with music) as reciprocal or conjoined. What impresses its meaning on me is what I *find* impressive or important or to matter to me. To take an interest in these impressions is part—possibly all—of what counts as the education of my senses, "as though without [the arts] we build our knowledge of our place in the world on the basis of sensory deprivation, starving our desires."[85] And my driving interest in wording or otherwise gesturing towards such (possibly ecstatic) experiences is no more and no less mysterious than my driving wish for reciprocal companionship; simply put, wording such experiences is an expression or symptom of that wish. If I see how understanding your sentence (or failing to) is captured by *that* picture, not by one in which

I try to grasp, in or through your words, their overarching or underlying universal meanings, then I may well see why likening linguistic to musical understanding might dawn on someone with a philosophical life out of (or with) music—a Wittgenstein, a Cavell—and why in the end they might find it more fruitful to investigate, not the nature of linguistic meaning or signification, but the nature of human understanding and its vicissitudes.[86]

* * * *

I SHOULD END BY SPEAKING to a conspicuous worry over my claim that Cavell's distinctive orientation in philosophy is guided by his finding philosophy from out of his devotion to music, particularly as that life is revealed in *Little Did I Know*. Have I (has Cavell) demonstrated that some sort of musical life will project itself onto some sort of philosophical life, or have I (has Cavell) projected a philosophical understanding onto scenes from a childhood that happens to have been occupied or preoccupied with music, and then outgrew that occupation along with childhood? To begin, I hope that my use of the word "guided" will help to steer a reading of my claim, so that one might notice, for example, that one can be guided by a star, something distant, dim, and silent (but not for that reason unfit for hitching your wagon to).[87] My claim is also not meant to contravene the truth that many of the five hundred pages of *Little Did I Know* do *not* speak explicitly about music, and yet it is the *whole* of that narrative that is said to tell what "detours on the human path to death" produced the philosophical spirit that is Stanley Cavell.[88] Still, I take encouragement from noting that, in defending his ambition to "test" the idea of entrusting himself "to write, however limitedly, the autobiography of a species; if not of humanity as a whole, then representative of anyone who finds himself or herself in it," Cavell explains that such an idea "is a specific attitude one takes to what happens to the soul, no more pretentious than sitting on a horse, or sitting at the piano, properly."[89] We do not learn in his autobiography what Cavell knows about sitting on a horse properly. But if I were to speak to what Cavell knows about sitting at the piano properly: the attitude that might be mistaken for pretentiousness is the precious moment or two when, sitting in silence, you imagine the sounds you are about to make and then, with the first notes, focus your attention on and become receptive to what each next moment of sound contains, receptive to whatever responsiveness is required of you to invite impressions of meaning. It is an attitude that is a kind of natural primer for the attitude of philosophical or autobiographical reflection. As for the possibility that I (or Cavell) have projected philosophical significance back onto certain musical moments excerpted from memory: that seems as unavoidable, and as necessary to acknowledge, as the very real philosophical significance of those formative, guiding moments themselves.

Notes

1 The present chapter is a substantially expanded version of "Words Fail Me. (Stanley Cavell's Life Out of Music)," that appeared in *Inheriting Stanley Cavell: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. David LaRocca (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 187–97. A draft of this expanded version was presented at the online conference "Stanley Cavell: Constellations of the Ordinary II—International Colloquium," sponsored by Centro de Estudios Filosoficos, Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima, Perú, July 2021. I'm grateful to Victor J. Krebs for organizing the conference, and to conference participants Byron Davies, Nancy Yousef, Paul Standish, Steven Affeldt, and Victor again, for their helpful questions and comments. I especially want to thank Avner Baz for a set of insightful written responses, and Steven again for past and continuing conversations on Cavell's work.

2 John T. Scott, "The Harmony between Rousseau's Musical Theory and His Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 2 (1998): 287.

3 Georges Liébert, *Nietzsche and Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

4 Maurice O'Connor Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein," in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 160.

5 Cf. Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 73–5, 183; Andrea Olmstead, *Conversations with Roger Sessions* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 107–8.

6 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 172.

7 Ibid., 225; cf. 209.

8 Cavell doesn't make explicit Thoreau's "morning/mourning" pun in his book on *Walden*—the word "mourning" doesn't appear there—but see Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), especially ch. 2, "Sentences," where "morning" is paired with "moulting" (and "metamorphosis" and "leaving"); *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 44–5, 72–3, 171–2; and *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque: Living Batch Press, 1989), 83–4. See also David LaRocca, "In the Place of Mourning: Questioning the Privations of the Private," *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2013): 227–42.

9 See my "A Soteriology of Reading: Cavell's Excerpts from Memory," ch. 5 in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, ed. James Loxley and Andrew Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 76–91; James Conant, "The Triumph of the Gift Over the Curse in Stanley Cavell's *Little Did I Know*," *MLN*, vol. 126 (2011): 1004–13; Timothy Gould, "Me, Myself and Us: Autobiography and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell," *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian Studies*, vol. 1 (2013): 4–18; and Chiara Alfano, "A Scarred Tympanum," *Conversations*, vol. 1 (2013): 19–38.

10 Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 84.

11 Ibid.

12 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 215.

13 Georges Liébert's *Nietzsche and Music* is a model for such a book.

14 Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It," chaps. 7 and 8 in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976 [1969]), 180–237.

15 I was by then well on my way to the better part of a lifetime of conversation with Cavell, and also with the remarkable cadre of graduate students studying with him in the mid-to-late 1980s at Harvard, a group he would later describe to me, and then in print, as "permanently inspiring" and "providing a continuity of intellectual purpose unmatched in my decades of teaching" (Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 476).

16 Cavell, "Music Discomposed," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 192–3.

17 James Conant, "Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder," *The Yale Review*, vol. 79 (Spring 1990): 328–64, 329; see also "Must We Show What We Cannot Say?," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 242–83. The subtleties of the Diamond/Conant resolute reading may be at right angles to, and so allow for, indeterminate aesthetic experiences that can't be given a name or re-identified, and in that sense are unsayable. Suffice it to say that, at this early stage of our careers, I heard Jim to be making (and he may have meant) a broad denial of a something bearing "ineffable sense."

18 Cavell, "Music Discomposed," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 192.

19 Ibid.

20 Experiences of sudden (visual or auditory) recognition are the explicit topic of Wittgenstein's late remarks on aspect-seeing, remarks that figure prominently in Part Four of Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* and that he returned to late in his career. See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 354ff.; and his "The Touch of Words," in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, ed. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81–98.

21 Cavell, "Music Discomposed," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 193.

22 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §610, §78.

23 "Nearly everybody can recognize a surly look or the smell of tar, but few can describe them non-committally, i.e. otherwise than as 'surly' or 'of tar.'" J. L. Austin, "Other Minds," in *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 85.

24 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 53.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 22–3. Stanley's contribution to the review was a piano piece entitled "Indian Drums" which our autobiographer says "I can still play flawlessly on demand," thereby making a rare and explicit gag out of the truth.

28 Ibid., 74, 77.

29 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §217.

30 Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), see p. 70ff.

31 Stanley Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," ch. 24 in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 269–78.

32 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 209, 211; quoted both more and less extensively by Cavell in "Impressions of Revolution," 275. See also Cavell, "Benjamin and Wittgenstein," ch. 7 in *Here and There*, 122–4; "An Understanding with Music," ch. 21 in *Here and There*, 253; "Kivy on *Idomeneo*," ch. 22 in *Here and There*, 258–9.

33 Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," *Here and There*, 276.

34 Stanley Cavell, "The Wittgensteinian Event," in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (London: Routledge, 2006), 11.

35 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §527, as quoted by Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," 278. Cf. Cavell, "An Understanding with Music," 253; "Philosophy and the Unheard," ch. 23 in *Here and There*, 261; and "A Scale of Eternity," ch. 25 in *Here and There*, 280. (The translation in the revised 4th edition of *Investigations* reads: "Understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think.")

36 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §527. For the later Wittgenstein's conception of language as revealed through the lens of his life with music, see my "The Aesthetic Dimension of Wittgenstein's Later Writings," in *Wittgenstein on Aesthetic Understanding*, ed. Garry L. Hagberg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3–29.

37 Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," *Here and There*, 277.

38 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 253 (XI, xxvii).

39 Cavell, "Philosophy and the Unheard," *Here and There*, 261.

40 Cavell, "A Scale of Eternity," *Here and There*, 280.

41 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 216.

42 Letter from Rush Rhees to G. H. von Wright, January 22, 1976; quoted in Christian Erbacher, "Editorial Approaches to Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*: Towards a Historical Appreciation," *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2015): 184.

43 Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," *Here and There*, 278.

44 Cavell, "Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise," ch. 3 in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 67.

45 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 2.

46 Ibid., 163. Cavell may be misremembering the extent to which Goodman's recording of his theme song ("Let's Dance"—see below) "had become a part of [his] brain." While Goodman adopted his theme song in the mid-1930s and it was familiar to radio listeners from his frequent national broadcasts, he didn't make his first and most famous commercial recording of it until October 24, 1939. The Goodman band performed at the San Francisco World's Fair (formally known as the Golden Gate International Exposition) in July of 1939, three months before that recording was made.

47 Ibid., 163–4; cf. endnote 85, below.

48 Ibid., 163.

49 Cavell, "A Scale of Eternity: Gustav Mahler and the Autobiographical," in *Late Thoughts: Reflections on Artists and Composers at Work*, ed. Karen Painter and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 214; cf. *Here and There*, 285.

50 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 164–5. Cavell adds parenthetically: "The concept of sublimity was not then in my repertory."

51 In 2013, late in his life and mostly staying at home, Stanley told me not that he was unconnected with the world outside his house but that he was, pleasantly, "uncathected" with it.

52 Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," *Here and There*, 274.

53 Cavell, "A Scale of Eternity," *Here and There*, 285.

54 Cavell, "What Becomes of Things on Film?," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 181.

55 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 68, 71.

56 For the centrality of transcription to a jazz improviser's self-education, see my "Jazz Improvisation, the Body, and the Ordinary," *Tidskrift för kulturstudier / Journal of Cultural Studies* 5 (2002): 90.

57 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 68.

58 Ibid., 73.

59 Ibid., 76.

60 See Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation (Politics as Opposed to What?)," *Themes Out of School*, 45–8.

61 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 76.

62 Cavell, "The Politics of Interpretation," *Themes Out of School*, 46.

63 Ibid.

64 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 231, 234.

65 Ibid., 234.

66 Ibid., 235. The man in question, whom Cavell does not identify, was almost certainly Josef Bonime, an Eastern European Jewish émigré (like Cavell's father) and a pianist (like his mother) who made early recordings with famed violinists Mischa Elman and Eugene Ysaye, then went on to work as in-house

composer and conductor for various CBS and NBC radio shows. He put together the "Let's Dance" weekly radio program on which the Goodman band appeared in 1934–5 and is actually credited as co-composer (with Gregory Stone) of Goodman's theme song, "Let's Dance." At the time of his death, Bonime resided at 322 Central Park West (Obituary, *New York Times*, November 10, 1959).

67 Ibid., 235–6.

68 The musical connection between the Goodman theme song and the Weber waltz is in fact, or has since become, somewhat well-known, judging not only from Wikipedia entries and online blog postings but also from the widely distributed if barely watchable 1956 biopic *The Benny Goodman Story*, starring Steve Allen and Donna Reed. (The movie's "Let's Dance" radio show scene depicts the top-of-the-hour transition from the Kel Murray orchestra signing off with a frothy arrangement of *Invitation to the Dance* immediately after which, on a rotating stage, the Benny Goodman band appears performing "Let's Dance.") That said, it is striking that the connection goes unmentioned in perhaps the most authoritative review of the period, Gunther Schuller's *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). When I mentioned the connection to Juilliard faculty member and famed drummer Kenny Washington, known in some quarters as "The Jazz Maniac" for his knowledge of jazz history, he said that he was unaware of it.

69 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 236.

70 The *locus classicus* of Wittgenstein's remarks on aspect-seeing is section 11 of Part II (retitled *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment*) of *Philosophical Investigations*.

71 Cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 369.

72 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 225.

73 Ibid., 234–5.

74 Ibid., 235.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 236.

77 On the importance of the demand to "imagine the sounds" in any of Cavell's interpretive efforts, see my "A Soteriology of Reading," *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, 79, 82–5.

78 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 421ff. In the abstract that Cavell sent me for his contribution to *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew* ("The Touch of Words"), he wrote the following, related thought: "Experience, as Wittgenstein recounts it in these passages [on aspect-blindness and, relatedly, soul-blindness], is not a peculiar perception of an object but a response to the differences and similarities between objects, even, one could say, to an object's difference from itself, its putting forth, all at once, as it were, a new face (eliciting my response, not awaiting my perception)."

79 Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," ch. 10 in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 269; "Must We Mean What We Say?," ch. 1 in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 36 n.31.

80 Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," ch. 3 in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 87.

81 Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," *Here and There*, 276.

82 Ibid., 276–7.

83 Cavell presents an extensive discussion of where intention (and hence, meaning) in art lies in "A Matter of Meaning It," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 225–37.

84 Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," *Here and There*, 277. Cavell's sense of "what we want to explain" in discussing what counts as "understanding music" is echoed in, or echoes, Wittgenstein's remarks on how we convey our experiences of music; see my "The Aesthetic Dimension of Wittgenstein's Later Writings," *Wittgenstein on Aesthetic Understanding*, 13–15.

85 Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," *Here and There*, 277. The sense of this remark is heightened beyond measure by what Cavell would later write in *Little Did I Know*: "I had characteristically taken it as an unquestionable fact of my life that from the time of that first move [from the south to the north side of Atlanta] until I left Sacramento for Berkeley ten years later I did not draw a happy breath. […] What is true is that for long periods I spent so much time by myself that a therapist friend of mine will describe something I said alluding to days of that period as expressing a state of sensory deprivation, as if I had been confined in a cave" (54).

86 See, for example, Cavell's condensed appraisal of human understanding and its vicissitudes in his late entry on August 26, 2004 in *Little Did I Know*, 532.

87 Cf. Cavell's late entry on August 27, 2004 in *Little Did I Know*, 533–5.

88 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 4.

89 Ibid., 6.