

## Introduction

---

A half-century ago appeared one of the most remarkable and innovative works in English-speaking philosophy of the twentieth century, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969, hereafter *MWM*). The occasion for our volume is to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of its publication by providing a handbook to it, and thus a guide to entering the early thought of its author, Stanley Cavell (1926–2018). *MWM* is a firecracker of a book, exploding in multiple directions, colorful and ambitious. But it is neither esoteric nor obscure nor eclectic. We have gathered this collection of essays to help readers of *MWM* come to appreciate its lasting significance for many different fields – philosophy of language, anthropology, literary studies, history, epistemology, literature, and literary theory. Together, the chapters that follow demonstrate the relevance of Cavell's ways of thinking to issues with which we all struggle: the power of words, art and human personality, claims to objectivity that go awry in crisis, expressions of intent and excuse in a world of passions and values, skepticism about truth and meaning. *MWM* is a classic: it does what philosophical works at their best, throughout human history, are able to do. It is a revolutionary book (literally), transforming its audience by presenting the emancipatory powers of thought and art and language:

Wherever there really is a love of wisdom – or call it the passion for truth – it is inherently, if usually ineffectively, revolutionary; because it is the same as a hatred of the falseness in one's character and of the needless and unnatural compromises in one's institutions. (*MWM* xxxix)

Our aim here – to draw on a concept Cavell introduces in *MWM* – is to transform *MWM* from an object of interpretation into a means of interpretation, a self-reflexive, revolutionary work (Preface, xxiii, xxviii). Some of the analyses that follow stress overarching themes in Cavell's work as a whole, demonstrating the many ways in which *MWM* anticipates themes he developed in subsequent writings. Others cast *MWM* within the trio of books Cavell produced in this incredibly creative period we might call Early Cavell: soon after *MWM* came *The World Viewed*:

2 Introduction

*Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971) and *The Senses of Walden* (1972), and during this time he also finished his dissertation, the platform upon which, several years later, he would construct *The Claim of Reason* (1979). Yet the main focus of the essays that follow is *MWM* itself and the deep transformation in philosophy and in culture it claims.<sup>1</sup> Cavell starts from Austin and Wittgenstein, remarkably giving them equal importance in the book as preparatory for the democratic method of *MWM*, which puts on an equal philosophical footing Austin, Kant, Freud, art criticism, “new music,” Kierkegaard, Beckett, and Shakespeare.

*MWM* is an empowerment of ordinary language philosophy (OLP), both as a philosophical instrument of analysis, and as a cultural matter. Hence the importance of Cavell's claim of *MWM* as a book, not a collection of published essays. With *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell opens the possibility, beyond the all-too-comfortable division between “analytic” and “continental” philosophy, of a critical divide within the analytic side: between the scientist heirs of logical positivism, and the reception of Wittgenstein's and Austin's work. He reveals the deep and multiple connections of OLP to contemporary culture – from arts to politics – something that has appeared more clearly in our century.

*Must We Mean What We Say?* is the best entrance into Cavell's philosophy for those who are willing to struggle with the remarkable range of his ideas, each of them connected with the others. Cavell's writing is both centered and foundational, demanding rigorous attention to moral texture, perception, and detail, as well as expression and voice; radically pressing the analytic tradition forward into life, away from self-undermining logical abstractions while at the same time recovering the art of the skeptical essay in the tradition of Montaigne and Emerson (thinkers Cavell would only later begin to write about in earnest).

*Must We Mean What We Say?* is the first work of what is called “contemporary thought” to carry the project of ordinary language philosophy through to its end. This philosophy of language is rooted in J.L. Austin's method and goes back to Wittgenstein's first question in the Blue Book, and to Austin's question in his first essays: “What is the meaning of a word?” What is it to speak, to say anything? How and why do we talk? What are the implications of this activity for our account of what it is to be human? How do we make our words and deeds fully our own?

<sup>1</sup> See S. Mulhall, Preface to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 2015 Edition, Cambridge University Press.

*MWM* is also built on elements of life. It appeared in 1969, just as the United States was undergoing an explosion of student protests in the face of the Vietnam War and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, and others. By the time of the publication of the book, Cavell, already a professor of Aesthetics and Theory of Value at Harvard, was mobilized with his students. Three hundred of them had confronted the university President in protest against his support for the Vietnam War. They had been evacuated with unprecedented brutality (tear gas and beatings) by the police. As a result, the entire campus went on strike. Cavell also accompanied students' struggles for civil rights in the 1960s, traveling with them in 1964, in the tragic Freedom Summer, to Tougaloo College, in Jackson, Mississippi for a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee summer school. Cavell and John Rawls carried in April 1969 a motion that allowed the creation of a department of African American studies at Harvard – relaying a student campaign launched following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

But *MWM* does not confront “history,” “politics,” “autobiography,” or “progress” in what would ordinarily be conceived of as political or biographical terms. Instead it transforms the very idea of such confrontation by focusing on aspects of reality that must be in place for confrontation to be pertinent: everyday moments of improvisation, evasion, and moral response – in short, ordinary forms of life, to use a phrase Cavell makes central to our understanding of Wittgenstein. Cavell urges by means of philosophy, literature, and conversation the kinds of self-confrontation and self-care that are preconditions for individuals and communities to lead flourishing democratic lives. *MWM* is a philosophy of culture, not by defending or characterizing any particular culture, but by bringing us a meditation on the contingencies and possibilities required for any culture: what Cavell famously calls the “whirl of organism” of our forms of life (*MWM* 52).

First and foremost, the book grapples with the fact that we mean, however incompletely and partially, sometimes perfectly clearly, sometimes obfuscating ourselves and reality. We express passions and claims to authenticity and what is true, we intend, we fail at meaning and at acting, we evade what we know and then claim to know what we most desire. This is the given of human life in language, but it is not a static given, like the sense data of the traditional twentieth-century epistemologist: the given is ordinary language.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Sandra Laugier, *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, trans. Daniela Ginsburg (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

4 Introduction

The examination of ordinary language Cavell undertakes has its roots in an ethics and an aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> The attention to the ordinary detail of words and world becomes a new, revolutionary method. In this Cavell is methodologically faithful to Austin, who calls philosophy of language “a promising site for field work” and surveys, taking an anthropological view of human speaking practices. The main concepts in Austin’s work, performative utterances and excuses, are as early as *MWM* seen not only in terms of propositions and meanings, but of encounters with and of others.

*MWM* puts together essays that, simply by being brought together, as a book, reveal a radical, original problematic that Cavell thematically developed in his later work. It offers its readers a method.

To claim *MWM* as a book meant also, for Cavell, claiming the necessity of writing and publishing books in philosophy at a moment when analytic philosophy was establishing itself as a conversation driven by polemics between articles and arguments. Cavell meant to prove that the project of analytical philosophy, to come closer to the world by examining language, could only be accomplished if we could find the conditions of truth or validity of ethical or aesthetic statements, statements of value, and real conversations; about all that we say about what actually matters to us. Cavell calls this in *MWM* the ordinary world:

I mean, of course, the ordinary world. That may not be all there is, but it is important enough: morality is that world, and so are force and love; so is art and a part of knowledge (the part which is about the world); and so is religion (wherever God is). (*MWM* 40)

The ordinary world is not everything there is in the world, “but it is important enough.”

The question is again that of OLP: the philosophical force of using “what we say” appears when we ask ourselves, not only what is said, but what is this WE. How can I, do I mean what we say? Cavell has thus raised in *MWM* in the 1960s the question of our capacity for thought as constantly related to our judgment of what counts, as never being able to be outsourced to others; as being our responsibility.

Everywhere Cavell argues that the project of becoming a someone, an individual with a freely expressed personality, is not a given, is based on contingencies and casualties: art and chance, opportunities seized or forsaken, always in the details of everyday life, which is where the large ideas of philosophy (transcendence and overcoming, self-knowledge and will) find their home. This is why Cavell’s tone is guarded yet

<sup>3</sup> See here Arata Hamawaki, Chapter 6.

unflinching, hopeful about honesty in reckoning with a world that is very far from perfect. He is unwilling to press to the side, but insists on working through, the skeptical sense that all claims to know oneself and others, to claim to know what is right, are to be discarded as illusions or cynical ploys. Philosophy should, does, and must articulate a person's way of finding her voice through life in an increasingly violent, uncertain, and confusing world. This seems to be fully confirmed in our lives today, pursued in a whirl of organism, disasters, pandemic, the flood of words and images in social media, and virtual selfhood and expression.<sup>4</sup>

Cavell's thought is a form of self-reflective realism, one dedicated to fighting the "craving for unreality" that is so characteristic of human dreams, actions, ideals, stories, and aspirations (Preface, xx). That his call for this has been heeded is confirmed in his Preface to the updated edition of *MWM*, when he notices that on two coasts of the United States the first edition of the book had been stolen so many times from two large libraries that it was deemed ineligible to be replaced (Preface, xxx). Cavell imagines droves of impoverished students grabbing for a book they desire but cannot afford. As likely is that this particular book is a very personal treasure, sparking in its readers the desire to achieve community through achieving individuality in tone, expression, and gesture. That is a heady, ambitious promise: that we may hope for a life in community with others precisely by following our deepest, most private desires to the end.

We have divided the essays into three groups.

Part I, "Ordinary Language and Its Philosophy," focuses on method and the philosophical essentials earmarking Cavell's thought as a defense of ordinary language philosophy. We initiate the collection with an explanation of why and in what ways generally *MWM* constitutes a turn in philosophy that still matters today. Sandra Laugier places the radicality of Cavell's intervention in philosophy of language into relief, explaining why this mattered in 1969, and why it matters today. An independent fashioner of ethics, philosophy of language, and politics in her own right, Laugier explains why *MWM* is a book, not merely of historical, but of actual, living, importance. As she emphasizes, we still lack answers to the questions, "What is the meaning of a word?" "What is it to speak, and how do we talk?" and "What are the implications of this activity for our

<sup>4</sup> See Juliet Floyd and James E. Katz (eds.), *Philosophy of Emerging Media: Understanding, Appreciation, Application* (Oxford University Press, 2015); see also Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) and *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology After Wittgenstein* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

6 Introduction

account of what it is to be human?” Cavell brought together so many different themes in attacking these questions, showing how each forms a crucial part of the answer that must be addressed, not from a grand theoretical perspective, but through a working through of our ordinary lives with care and attention. Laugier hence defends the very idea of “ordinary language philosophy,” not as it is caricatured in philosophy since the 1960s, but as an actual alternative to what mainstream philosophy of language has become.

Juliet Floyd shows how Cavell uses his masterful rereadings of Wittgenstein throughout *MWM* to create this alternative, founding what thirty years later would come to be called the “New Wittgenstein,” a philosopher who was not ending philosophy, but calling for more of it, better done, by everyone – and precisely by insisting on a wider focus on concepts and moral problems we care about in life, the power of our “forms of life.” In *MWM* Cavell overcame the end-of-philosophy reading of Wittgenstein. He also anticipated by over a decade Kripke’s focus on the idea of following a rule in Wittgenstein as closely affiliated with Wittgenstein’s remarks on skepticism. In Cavell, the idea that meaning is constituted by a set of rules for utilizing words is overturned, not through an appeal to the force of consensus or convention, but its opposite: the overcoming of convention’s tyrannies. Wittgenstein’s response to a formalized, conventionalized, or contractual idea of meaning is to turn it on its head: it is not the forms themselves, given to us independently of our actions and responses, but the lives we live with them that make for their rigor. That we face the endless responsibility of keeping our words intelligible, of reinventing meaning as we go, is an idea at the heart of Cavell’s novel form of ordinary language philosophizing, developed in his subsequent work.

The endless responsibilities we face in everyday life with words is also the subject of Jean-Philippe Narboux’s essay on what he calls “elaboratives” in Cavell. Picking up on Cavell’s appropriation of Austin’s thought in “Excuses,” Narboux shows how Cavell unfolds the thought that in the context of everyday life, actions must find proper descriptions that are not constitutive of the actions, or tied to their essences, but instead open themselves up to intelligible elaboration in conversation with others. No action is what it is apart from its situating in the ongoing stream of discussion, the whirl of the ordinary, where what we care about and find objectionable find themselves intimately tied to what we are prepared to count as a description of an action. This is evident in law courts, as Austin noted, where the establishing of the nature, proper description of, and significance of an action will depend upon a whole range of considerations that are familiar from a careful

study of cases. Narboux draws connections between the thought of Cavell and that of Elizabeth Anscombe and more recent work in philosophy of action where elaboratives are explored.

In “Faces of the Ordinary” Eli Friedlander takes up the parallel Cavell explores in “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” between an aesthetic judgment construed as an expression with a claim to universality (Kant) and the claims of ordinary language philosophizing insofar as it takes a stand on “what we would say”. In both cases there is the claim to universality and necessity but without the anticipation of agreement in conclusions or the determinate application of concepts. In Cavell, as in Wittgenstein, the hope or dimension of possible agreement is moved, Friedlander argues, into the ground of our lives in language, in our inhabiting a life, a world, of meaning. The remarkable twofold resonance of Cavell’s worked-out parallel has been one of the most influential parts of *MWM*’s legacy in academic philosophy. Conversely, the liberation of ordinary language philosophy from the very idea of a straitjacket of rules precisely through an exploration of art proved fertile, not only for Cavell but for the ordinary language tradition itself, which has inherited its multifaceted forms of response and ability to shift our sensibilities from precisely the point at which “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” entered the tradition.

Part II, “Aesthetics and the Modern,” brings us face to face with an inescapable aspect of the philosophical habitat that Cavell asks us to explore and acknowledge as real: the need for a first-person perspective on one’s own stance, one’s own sense of things, one’s own meaning, and the power of art and culture to fill the demands of this need. This major theme in Cavell’s thought is figured in the autobiographical moments of his writing, expressed in literary forms.

In “‘Language-Games’ and ‘Forms of Life’: Cavell’s Reading of Wittgenstein and Its Relevance to Literary Studies,” Greg Chase, a scholar of modern and contemporary American literature, returns to Cavell’s pioneering interpretation of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* (also a focus of Floyd’s essay) and highlights what the field of literary studies stands to gain from engaging with this aspect of Cavell’s thought. Chase begins by describing how Jean-François Lyotard’s influential book *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) puts forward an oversimplified account of Wittgensteinian “language-games.” Next, Chase discusses how “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” the second essay in *MWM*, exposes the problems with this postmodern conception of Wittgenstein. Chase closes with a reading of Sherwood Anderson’s modernist short story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), demonstrating how – when read in the spirit of Cavell’s Wittgenstein – this work

8 Introduction

illuminates the “form of life” that Anderson’s isolated characters all share.

Epistemologist and Kant scholar Arata Hamawaki shows how we must not think that this first-person aspect somehow pollutes objectivity in our claims. Instead objectivity, the meaning and saying of genuine things, requires a voice speaking, a perspective, and a response. Picking up on the parallel in “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” explored by Friedlander, Hamawaki shows how Cavell extends Kant’s idea that “it must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all my representations.” Judgments of what one would say when, like aesthetic judgments, evince a certain freedom of response that Kant calls “heautonomy”: not merely the giving of rules to oneself (as in the “autonomy” of ethics), but the subjective self-picturing of our own responses with concepts and rules. Hamawaki thus shows how Cavell transforms the structure of Kant’s “universal voice” into a thoroughgoing dimension of speech, and so the focus of the ordinary language philosopher’s claims. The point is not agreement on what is true, but the need for harmony among us in our sensibilities with words, in what we each mean, one by one: what Kant and Wittgenstein call *Übereinstimmung*. Hence the constant threat, as Hamawaki emphasizes, of “alienation” in our speech with others.

Robert Engelman’s contribution, “Reading Into It or Hearing It Out? Cavell on Modernism and the Art Critic’s Hermeneutical Risk,” also addresses the inextricability of the first-person perspective from the making of aesthetic claims. In “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” Cavell writes that the critic must not “discount” her own subjectivity but must instead “master it in exemplary ways” (*MWM* 94). Exploring the implications of this comment, Engelman draws a distinction between imposing upon and finding meaning in an artwork: what he describes as the line between “reading into” and “hearing out.” To illustrate this distinction, he looks at Cavell’s analysis of Beckett’s *Endgame* in “Ending the Waiting Game,” wondering whether Cavell has extracted an interpretive framework from the play or imposed his own views upon it. Building on Cavell’s own observations about modernism, Engelman also suggests that the situation of modernism makes the distinction between “reading into” and “hearing out” more tenuous than ever before.

In his “Must We Sing What We Mean?” philosopher Vincent Colapietro argues for the centrality of “Music Discomposed” and “A Matter of Meaning It” to *MWM*, drawing out most parallels between musical composition and philosophical authorship: voice, timing, extemporaneity, contingency, deep listening, rule-following, and an uncompromising affirmation of the radical nature of human

responsibility. He highlights Cavell's resistance to the idea of "science chic" in music theory, the idea that all may be written down in a kind of mathematical mechanism. Already in *MWM* Cavell anticipated a way past the so-called culture wars that have become so pointless since the 1980s. Colapietro shows how scat instantiates Cavell's dynamic view of culture, the everyday, and revolution, its rhythms available to be read back into remarks from Thoreau's *Walden*. Cavell's sense of tradition should be contrasted with, e.g., Allan Bloom's attacks on Louis Armstrong and others for their apparently ignorant appropriations of German music (e.g., "Mack the Knife").<sup>5</sup> Already in 1969, Cavell had an answer to Bloom: Armstrong's power is the power to respond to his own culture through another, it is mastery, spontaneity, and the creation of culture from within.

Part III of the volume turns to the themes of "Tragedy and the Self." Naoko Saito's essay "Philosophy as Autobiography: From *Must We Mean What We Say?* to *Little Did I Know*" revisits the theme of the autobiographical in Cavell's way of practicing philosophy, focusing on the concept of "voice" in ordinary language philosophy. The autobiographical dimensions of Cavell's writing involve not only self-education, she explains, but also a radical re-placement of the subject of and in philosophy. The idea of finding one's voice tends to be associated with a foundationalist view of the self. Such a misreading misses the radicality of Cavell's reconstruction of philosophy and assimilates his writing into the dominant idea of education through narrative, with its inward turn. In contrast, Saito brings forward an idea of "tonality" in philosophy, showing how it comes to the fore in "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy." Saito also explains how Cavell's early and later works reinforce one another, realizing an understanding of the nature of voice that transforms philosophy.

In "The Finer Weapon: Cavell, Philosophy, and Praise" Victor Krebs shows how Cavell shifts the possibilities for philosophy by replacing traditional themes of epistemology with a very different idea of focusing on, and discussing aloud, what is important to us. Instead of taking the impossibility of certain knowledge in experience as an intellectual problem, Cavell understands it as an existential condition. Philosophers have traditionally disavowed and thereby avoided the problems and conditions of life by turning skepticism into an intellectual problem. The pathology

<sup>5</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). See S. Cavell, "Who Disappoints Whom", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Spring, 1989), pp. 606–610.

10 Introduction

behind that disavowal becomes the center of what Krebs calls Cavell's "clinical turn": a radical change in attitude, where thinking is – as Cavell puts it – a mode of praise. Krebs sees thinking as praise as a philosophical way to transform the very idea of receptiveness to experience in philosophy, away from a traditional epistemological problem and toward reconnection with feeling and passion. This allows Cavell to bring the feeling, expressing human body back into philosophy.

In "On Cavell's 'Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*' – with Constant Reference to Austen" poet and philosopher Kelly Jolley explores the themes brought to salience by Cavell in his earliest explicit response to religious writing. What is it to forget a concept, confuse one, or lose one? These are familiar terms of criticism from Kierkegaard, but they can seem strangely otiose or themselves confused. Cavell emphasizes in *MWM* both the familiarity and the unfamiliarity of their contours in our lives, exploring the very ideas of "revelation" and "religious authority." Jolley gauges Cavell's elucidations of these terms, their critical purport in Kierkegaard's practice, and his assessment of their worth, which turns on whether they may find a philosophical or merely a psychological use. Jolley explores Cavell's assessment of the connection between the religious and the psychological and (later) the connection between the aesthetic and the political, endorsing (with qualifications) the first, while worrying (with qualifications) about the latter. The essay ends with a brief discussion of authorial indirection.

In "Tragic Implication," Sarah Beckwith looks at the links between the first and last essay in *MWM*. Cavell's concept of acknowledgment as it emerges in the book's last two essays has received a fair amount of scholarly attention. Beckwith's essay, by contrast, looks at the links between his work on and in ordinary language philosophy as it emerges in his first extension and radicalization of Austin's work in the book's titular essay, "Must We Mean What We Say?" She highlights the latency of tragedy in this early work, even as Cavell finds Austin's thought unable to accommodate tragedy. Ultimately, she argues that Cavell's account of moral encounter and response in *King Lear* teaches him his differences with Austin – differences that emerge in his later engagement with Austin: in, for example, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1994).

Our volume closes with Paul Standish's "Gored States and Theatrical Guises," an extended examination of "The Avoidance of Love," *MWM*'s final, far-reaching essay (also discussed by Beckwith), which moves from *King Lear* to a more general discussion of the relation between theater and theatricality before, in its final pages, reading the American experiment as tragedy. Standish considers a pair of comments from *MWM*'s preface, wherein Cavell connects problems of theatricalization to the