

Must We Mean What We Say?

Must We Mean What We Say?

A Book of Essays

Updated edition



STANLEY CAVELL



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To Cathy and Rachel

Contents



<i>Permissions</i>	page viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Preface to this edition by STEPHEN MULHALL</i>	xv
<i>Preface to updated edition of Must We Mean What We Say?</i>	xvii
<i>Foreword: An audience for philosophy</i>	xxx
1 Must we mean what we say?	1
2 The availability of Wittgenstein's later philosophy	41
3 Aesthetic problems of modern philosophy	68
4 Austin at criticism	91
5 Ending the waiting game: A reading of Beckett's <i>Endgame</i>	107
6 Kierkegaard's <i>On Authority and Revelation</i>	151
7 Music discomposed	167
8 A matter of meaning it	197
9 Knowing and acknowledging	220
10 The avoidance of love: A reading of <i>King Lear</i>	246
<i>Thematic index</i>	326
<i>Index of names</i>	329

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Acknowledgments



Four of the ten essays in this volume are published here for the first time:

The reading of *Endgame* was written in the summer and fall of 1964 and I have used some selection of its material each spring since then in the Humanities course which the Department of Philosophy at Harvard offers in the General Education program of the college. Similar selections were the basis for lectures given at Western Reserve University and the Case Institute, at the University of Saskatchewan, and at the University of North Carolina.

“Kierkegaard’s *On Authority and Revelation*” was prepared for a colloquium on that book held at the University of Minnesota by its Department of Philosophy in January 1966.

“Knowing and Acknowledging” is an expansion of my contribution to a colloquium held at the University of Rochester in May 1966. Its original version was written as a set of comments on a paper presented at that Colloquium by Professor Norman Malcolm; that is the paper of his, subsequently published with minor revisions, which is cited in this essay.

Part I of the reading of *King Lear* was written in the summer of 1966, partly as preparation for, partly out of dissatisfaction with, my lectures in the Humanities course mentioned previously. Part II was written in the summer and fall of 1967, during a period in which a sabbatical term was generously granted early by Harvard University in order that I might bring this book to a finish.

Nothing like it would have been started apart from Harvard’s Society of Fellows, in which I was a Junior Fellow from 1953–1956. The highest praise of the Society, and all it asks, is expressed in the work produced by the years of freedom it provides. In my case, the most precious benefit of those years was the chance to keep quiet, in particular to postpone the Ph.D., until there was something I wanted, and felt readier, to say.

The six essays which have already been published have been brought into uniform stylistic format; otherwise they appear here without, or with trivial, alterations. I might mention here one stylistic habit of mine which, in addition to irritation, may cause confusion. I use dots of omission in the usual way within quoted material, but I also use them apart from

quotations in place of marks such as “etc.” or “and so on” or “and the like.” My little justifications for this are (1) that since in this use they often indicate omissions of the end of lists of examples or possibilities which I have earlier introduced, I am in effect quoting myself (with, therefore, welcome abbreviation); and (2) that marks such as “and the like,” when needed frequently, seem to me at least as irritating as recurrent dots may be, and in addition are false (because if the list is an interesting one, its members are not in any obvious way “like” one another). I also use these dots, and again at the end of lists, as something like dots of suspension; not, however, because I suppose this device to dramatize the mind at work (generally, the opposite is truer) but because I wish to indicate that the mind might well do some work to produce further relevant examples. I can hardly excuse my use of list dots, any more than other of my habits which may annoy (e.g., a certain craving for parentheses, whose visual clarity seems to me to outweigh their oddity); for if I had found better devices for helping out my meaning, there would be no excuse for not having employed them. A further idiosyncrasy is especially noticeable in the later essays, the use of a dash before sentences. Initial recourse to this device was as a way of avoiding the change of topic (and the necessity for trumped up transitions) which a paragraph break would announce, while registering a significant shift of attitude or voice toward the topic at hand. The plainest use of the device is an explicit return to its old-fashioned employment to mark dialogue.—But there are so many justifications for not writing well.

My editors at Scribners have evidently had a mixed lot to contend with in helping to order this work. I am grateful for their indulgences, as well as for tact in drawing lines.

For permission to reprint I am grateful to the original publishers:

“Must We Mean What We Say?” is a greatly expanded version of a paper read as part of a symposium at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Coast Division, on December 19, 1957. The first part of that symposium was “On the Verification of Statements About Ordinary Language,” by Professor Benson Mates. These papers were first published together in *Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (1958) and both are reprinted in V. C. Chappell, ed., *Ordinary Language* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964). The page references to Professor Mates’ paper are according to its occurrence in the Chappell collection.

“The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” was first published in *The Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), and reprinted in George Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations* (Garden City,

New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966). Material for this paper was prepared during a period in which I received a grant from the Henry P. Kendall Foundation, to which I wish to express my gratitude.

“Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” was prepared for a volume of original essays by younger American philosophers, edited by Max Black, *Philosophy in America* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965). Approximately the first half of this paper was presented to a meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in October 1962. It was written during the year 1962–63 in which I was in residence at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, as was a longer study from which the Austin paper, listed immediately below, was extracted. These are fragments of the continuing profit that year remains for me.

“Austin at Criticism” was published first in *The Philosophical Review*, LXXIV (1965), and reprinted in Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967).

“Music Discomposed” was read as the opening paper of a symposium held at the sixth annual Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy in April 1965 and was published, together with the comments on it by Professor Monroe Beardsley and by Professor Joseph Margolis, as part of the Proceedings of that Colloquium, in Capitan and Merrill, eds., *Art, Mind, and Religion* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967). Most of the material in sections V, VI, and VII of this essay was presented as part of a symposium called “Composition, Improvisation and Chance,” held at a joint meeting of the American Musicological Society, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and the College Music Society, at the University of California, Berkeley, December 1960. The title of the symposium, as well as my participation in it, were both the work of its moderator, Joseph Kerman. I am grateful to him also for suggestions about the initial material I presented at Berkeley and about an earlier draft of the present paper.

“A Matter of Meaning It” constitutes my rejoinders to Beardsley and Margolis; while not read at the Oberlin Colloquium, it is included in its Proceedings.



The few personal acknowledgments which are scattered through these essays scarcely suggest the debts I have accumulated in the writing of them. Because the largest of these are debts of friendship as much as of instruction, I must hope that they were partly discharged in the course

of incurring them, for certainly the essays alone are insufficient repayment. I am thinking of conversations with Thomas Kuhn (especially during 1956–58, our first two years of teaching at Berkeley) about the nature of history and, in particular, about the relations between the histories of science and of philosophy; of the countless occasions on which I have learned about continental philosophy and literature from Kurt Fischer, in everything from isolated remarks to the course of lectures he gave to his graduate seminar at Berkeley on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*; of the years during which Thompson Clarke taught me to understand the power of traditional epistemology, and in particular of skepticism. My debt to Clarke is systematic, because it was through him, together with a study of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (on which we gave a joint seminar in 1959–60), that I came to see that everything I had said (in "Must We Mean What We Say?") in defense of the appeal to ordinary language could also be said in defense, rather than in criticism, of the claims of traditional philosophy; this idea grew for me into an ideal of criticism, and it is central to all my work in philosophy since then. Its most explicit statement, in the work which appears here, is given in the opening pages of "Knowing and Acknowledging." It is a guiding motivation of my Ph.D. dissertation. *The Claim to Rationality* (submitted to Harvard University in 1961, now soon to be published), a fact I mention here because ideas and formulations of that book (in particular, the view it develops of Wittgenstein's later philosophy) appear throughout the essays collected here, and I am uneasy about the possibility that from time to time I am relying on it as backing for claims which in the space of an essay are not developed enough to stand by themselves. This creates obvious risks of delusion.

The piece on Kierkegaard, the two on music, and that on Lear—that is to say, the bulk of the latest work—were written during periods in which their controlling ideas were recurrent topics of conversation with Michael Fried and John Harbison; the reservations and the satisfactions they expressed were always guiding for me. Their wives, Ruth Fried and Rose Mary Harbison, were frequently very much a part of those conversations, as they are part of those friendships; if what I owe to them is less specific, it is no less real. To say, in addition, that I owe to Michael Fried's instruction any understanding I have come to about modernist painting and sculpture, scarcely describes the importance that access of experience has had for me over the past three or four years. Its confirmation and correction and extension of my thoughts about the arts and about modernism is suggested by the writings of his to which I refer in various of the later

essays; but conversations with him about those topics, and about history and criticism, and about poetry and theater, are equally, if silently, present in them.

First books tend to over-ambitiousness, and nowhere more than in the bulk of debts they imagine themselves able to answer for.

I cannot forgo the pleasure of thanking my teachers of philosophy—Henry David Aiken, Abraham Kaplan, and Morton White—especially for their encouragement to think of, or to remember, philosophy as something more than the preoccupation of specialists. To the late J. L. Austin I owe, beyond what I hope is plain in my work, whatever is owed the teacher who shows one a way to do relevantly and fruitfully the thing one had almost given up hope of doing. And because all the pieces of this book were written after I had begun to teach, the responses of my students are often guiding in the way I have written, in everything from the specific choice of an example or allusion to a general tendency to swing between dialogue and harangue. Here I single out Allen Graubard and John McNees and Timothy Gould, whose intellectual companionship and whose acts of friendship since I came back to Cambridge to teach, are unforgettable.

That since that time I have enjoyed the friendship of Rogers Albritton, and therewith the power of his intelligence and sensibility, is a fortune which only those who know him can begin to appreciate.

My mother and father have waited for, and supported, these first fruits in the peculiar patience, and impatience, known only to parents. My uncle, Mendel Segal, began his avuncularity by supporting my infancy on his shoulders, and continued it, through my years in graduate school and my first years of teaching, with brotherly advice which usually cost him money. My wife, Cathleen Cohen Cavell, beyond the moments of timely editing and encouragement, kept in balance the sabbatical months in which the final stages of composition were accomplished. And now my daughter Rachel can see what it was I was doing as I inexplicably scribbled away those hundred afternoons and evenings.

That I am alone liable for the opacities and the crudities which defeat what I wanted to say, is a miserably simple fact. What is problematic is the expense borne by those who have tried to correct them, and to comfort the pain of correcting them.

S.C.

*31 December 1968
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

Preface to this edition

STEPHEN MULHALL



I had... fancies of putting [this] book out in a newspaper format, so that each essay could begin on the front page and end on the back page, with various conjunctions in between. (Cavell)

Suppose that a classic text is one whose ability to go on speaking to new generations of readers is grounded in the precision and depth of its address to its own time and place. Then a better understanding of the continuing fertility of Stanley Cavell's first book requires an appreciation of its penetratingly various engagements with North American culture in the late 1960s.

That culture's philosophy was divided between what were called "analytic" and "Continental" approaches to the subject, and—within the analytic side—between the earlier reception of logical positivism (with its attempted elevation of science and denigration of evaluative judgement) and the more recent reception of Wittgenstein's later philosophy (often affiliated with J. L. Austin's ways of affirming ordinary language). Its foremost artistic figures confronted the threats and opportunities of modernism (in the aftermath of the New Criticism, Abstract Expressionism and non-tonal music); and its political and moral life was wracked by inter-generational incomprehension and repudiation—a civil war of the spirit at once engendered by and fueling combat in foreign fields.

Each essay in Cavell's book is in conversation with at least one of these sites of confusion and conflict: and their inter-relatedness reveals that they are internally related to – hence interpretable by or in terms of—one another, and so can be (if not overcome, then ameliorated or at least better understood by being) brought into conversation. Cavell's interpretations of Shakespeare, Beckett and Schoenberg show that literature and music have ways of acknowledging (and so of denying) the authority of their own history, call it the significance of inherited forms of meaningfulness; and this brings out analogous difficulties in politics and morality—say, how temptations towards fraudulent speech and action (modes of self-presentation from which one's real self is absent, often unknowingly) can

afflict inter-generational understanding. His essay on Kierkegaard traces the genealogy of such problems, showing how deeply post-Enlightenment religion, politics and art suffer difficulties of authority that are also difficulties of authorship—of making one's thoughts, words and deeds fully one's own.

Cavell's perceptions of these broader human opacities and modes of self-injury enable and are enabled by his specifically philosophical investments, as broached in the opening sequence of essays on Austin and Wittgenstein. By allowing neither author to eclipse the other's individuality, Cavell there discloses a fascinating interpretation of "ordinary language philosophy" that sidesteps criticisms long viewed as licensing its dismissal, and reveals how extensively it interacts with the broader preoccupations of its culture. The emancipatory potential of Cavell's Wittgenstein has not thus far been properly acknowledged, let alone realized; but could anyone seriously deny that our contemporary culture continues to suffer versions and consequences of the failures of sense-making that he identifies and aspires to overcome? Until we can, this book of essays will have something to say to us.

Preface to updated edition of *Must we mean what we say?*



Friends have repeatedly remarked to me that some later preoccupation of mine can be found foreshadowed in passages of *Must We Mean What We Say?* This quality of previewing might be understood merely as a consequence of the book's history, that although it is my first book, and although its title essay was written in 1957, it collects work from the ensuing dozen years and was not published until I was into my fourth decade, when my interests may be thought to have been fairly developed. But I understand the presence of notable, surprising anticipations to suggest something more specific about the way, or space within which, I work, which I can put negatively as occurring within the knowledge that I never get things right, or let's rather say, see them through, the first time, causing my efforts perpetually to leave things so that they can be, and ask to be, returned to. Put positively, it is the knowledge that philosophical ideas reveal their good only in stages, and it is not clear whether a later stage will seem to be going forward or turning around or stopping, learning to find oneself at a loss.

I received my first copy of the book from its publisher on the day of what I recall as the most tortured of the emergency faculty meetings following the massive arrest of students occupying the main administration building of Harvard College, in April of 1969, so that my initial joy, or its expression, in perceiving the book's existence in the world, was largely put aside, whether as a relief from isolation or as a source of refuge it was hard to tell. But each of the ten essays making up the book has its own history, as does its Foreword, and a way of introducing this new edition of them is to give a little of the history in each case.

For some years, the only essays in the book that were discussed in print, or reprinted from it, were the opening two, sometimes as a pair; and those discussions were responses to their original appearance in philosophy journals, and, I believe, subsided after their collection into the book. The context of their companion essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* would have, perhaps, made it plainer to their readers (as they made it plainer to me) that in their declarations of indebtedness to the work of J. L. Austin and of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, my motivating question

was less how we know what we say and mean (which was the point on which criticism of those two papers were centered) than it was the question of what it betokens about our relation to the world, and others, and myself, that I do in fact, to an unknown extent, inescapably know (barring physical or psychic trauma), and that I chronically do not know or cannot say what I mean, and that I can know further by bethinking myself of what I would rather or might or must or could say, or not say, or rather not. Few philosophers would now, I believe, deny that the ability to speak a language carries with it the ability to perform these linguistic feats, but I assume most do not attach the importance I continue to do to the bearing of this ability on the questions of self-knowledge and of skepticism. Controversy over the importance of the ordinary is more likely now to arise in the form of a question not of the epistemological but of the political bearing of the ordinary, say upon whether the appeal to the ordinary is a mode of conforming to the state of one's society or of criticizing it.

The opening essay, "Must We Mean What We Say?," was undertaken as the result not so much of an invitation as of an assignment. Near the end of my first year of teaching at Berkeley, in the spring of 1957, I was told that a panel on ordinary language philosophy was being scheduled at the coming Christmas meetings of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, in which I would have a chance, let's say an obligation, to defend in public the views I had been advancing all year concerning the ground-breaking philosophical importance of the work of Austin, in the form of a response to a paper to be presented by my senior colleague Benson Mates. I had, as a result of Austin's visiting Harvard my last semester there, thrown away what may have been a partially written Ph.D. dissertation, and consequently arrived in Berkeley to take up the position of Assistant Professor there not only without a degree but with no concrete idea for a dissertation (an unthinkable circumstance after my generation in graduate school). The imposition of the obligation was fair enough. It was time that I get into the open some formulation of what had seemed so enlivening in my encounters with Austin, or else suffer the humiliation of finding that it was not, at my hands, defensible in grown-up discussion.

Reading the essay now, I still sense in it the initial exhilaration in finding ways to mean everything I was saying, and to say a larger fraction of what I had philosophically to say, than I had ever experienced. The elation was an experience as of escaping from what I had inarticulately felt in my philosophical education, and remaining in much of philosophy's dispensation as I began my life of teaching philosophy, as prohibitions on, or

suspicions of, everyday speech, quite in the absence of patient attention to the individual utterance. I am struck by a double anticipation in a formulation from the last page of “Must We Mean What We Say?” which speaks of Socrates “coax[ing] the mind down from self-assertion—subjective assertion and private definition—and leading it back, through the community, home.” First, the sense of the philosopher as responding to one lost will become thematic for me as my understanding of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* becomes less primitive than it was; second, the literary or allegorical mode of the formulation is something I recognized early as a way of mine of keeping an assertion tentative, that is, as marking it as a thought to be returned to. The implication that philosophical lostness requires something like guidance of a therapeutic sort may or may not be clear to others in these words, but they were ones in which at that period of my life I associated with the work of psychoanalysis. (The formulation “back, through the community, home” seems ambiguous as between meaning leading the mind back to its home in the community, or rather back, beyond this, to itself. Ambiguity was perhaps the best I could do then with the idea of philosophy’s ancient therapeutic ambition, before I had gotten into questions of the fantasy of a private language, of skepticism’s power to repudiate ordinary language, and of philosophy’s arrogance in its calling to speak for humanity, for “us.”)

I suppose that the idea of the philosopher as guide was formed in me in resistance to the still current idea of the philosopher as guard. So I should perhaps add that at no period of my life has it occurred to me that philosophical problems are unreal, that is, that they could be cured and philosophy thus ended, as if left behind. The problems I was concerned with are better expressed as about the all but unappeasable craving for unreality; Kant’s diagnosis of such perplexities was as *Transcendental Illusions*.

I had in “Must We Mean What We Say?” already suggested understanding the philosophical appeal to the ordinary in relation to Kant’s transcendental logic (*Must We Mean ... ?* p. 13), namely as the sense of uncovering the necessary conditions of the shared world; but not until the second essay of the book, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” was I able to give a certain textuality to this relation to Kant, at the point at which Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* announces that “Our investigation . . . is directed not toward phenomena, but, as one might say, toward the ‘possibilities’ of phenomena” (*ibid.* p. 65). And it would not be until after completing *The Claim of Reason* that I would feel I had secured some significant progress in assessing the difference it makes that

Wittgenstein sees illusions of meaning as something to which the finite creature is subject chronically, diurnally, as if in every word beyond the reach of philosophical system. The idea that there is no absolute escape from (the threat of) illusions and the desires constructed from them, say there is no therapy for this, in the sense of a cure for it—or rather the pervasiveness and hence invisibility of the idea that there might be some such escape—was evidently something that captured my fascination, halfway through *Must We Mean What We Say?*, with Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, in effect a study of the circumstance that “You're on earth, there's no cure for that” (*ibid.* p. 129).

“The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy” was written in answer to the invitation to prepare a review-essay of the publication of Wittgenstein's *The Blue and Brown Books* together with David Pole's *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, the first book (to my knowledge, in English) on its subject. My writing in this essay is from time to time marked by exasperation, even anger, always philosophically suspicious. No doubt the emotion was a response to encountering in Pole's book a dismissive treatment of work that had changed my sense of philosophy's possibilities (and rather encouraged my sense of intellectual isolation), a dismay exacerbated by the book's uniformly receiving praise, in my hearing, for its efforts. Nevertheless, I am not pleased to see my declaration that “none of [Wittgenstein's] thought is to be found” in Pole's book; I remember once changing that accusation to read “little of Wittgenstein's thought . . . etc.” and finding the change to be evasive and condescending. A more interesting reason for my review's moments of extreme impatience was my beginning to learn how difficult it was going to be, difficult in some way unprecedented in my experience, to say in some undisappointing way what my sense of the importance of Wittgenstein's work turned upon. Hence my impatience, not surprisingly, was in large part impatience with myself.

Accepting the invitation had in effect meant committing myself to reading Wittgenstein's *Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations”* (the over-title of *The Blue and Brown Books*) with a seriousness I knew I had not begun to give to the *Investigations* itself. No deadline for my essay was set or imagined, and I waited until the end of the academic year to allow the project uninterruptedly to take all summer if necessary. In fact what took all summer was just reading through Wittgenstein's two (preliminary) texts, which initiated notes and elaborations on my part larger in bulk than the bulk of Wittgenstein's texts. Along with finding my way to the excitement of accompanying the intensity of thought expressed in

these pages, I was discovering about the ordinary what I missed in Austin, namely, that if, as Wittgenstein puts the matter, “What we do is lead words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use,” then to understand how this happens we must understand how we have drifted, or been driven, *away* from the everyday, living as it were in exile from our words, not in a sure position from which to mean what we say. In short I discovered that skepticism, which metaphysics is apt to undertake to defeat, is a renewed threat in Wittgenstein, whereas Austin rather imagines that both skepticism and metaphysics can fairly readily be put aside, with the attentiveness and good will appealed to by his methods, as if the strength of ordinary language were more characteristic of it than its vulnerability. I note three passages, or formulations, from the essay, beyond the thematic matters, for example, of rules and of our knowledge of our language, that recurrently motivate later work of mine.

Take first the paragraph in “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” that runs: “We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. . . Nothing insures that we will make . . . the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling . . . senses of humor and of significance . . ., of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else . . . all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’ . . . It is a vision as simple as it is difficult and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying” (p. 52). In recent years this passage has been receiving increasing attention. The “vision” I speak of in the passage becomes further worked out ten years later as Chapter VII of *The Claim of Reason*, entitled “Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language,” where the idea in *Must We Mean . . . ?* of the communicative power of language as requiring nothing beyond (behind, beneath) our sharing, and maintaining, our human forms of life to ensure its success, is expressed in *The Claim of Reason* as there being “no reason” (p. 178) for our sharing them. (Such a requirement—for, let’s say, a metaphysical grounding of our ability to communicate—would amount to requiring that we have a reason for caring about one another in general, for attaching any significance to the fact that some things on earth manifest forms of life, and that some of these, to speak so, have souls. I also say there that these possibilities and necessities of our forms of life are nothing more and nothing less than natural (having two chapters earlier gone to some lengths to show that the distinction between the natural and the conventional is unstable).

Second, the characterization of the style of *Philosophical Investigations* as, among other matters, a crossing of the genres of Dogmatics and

Confession and Dialogue served, even in the space of a brief concluding section, to establish for me the issue of Wittgenstein's writing as one to which I have never stopped turning my thoughts.

Third, the formulation, "Belief is not enough [in reacting, for example, to Wittgenstein's extraordinary remark, 'If a lion could talk we could not understand him']. Either the suggestion penetrates past assessment and becomes part of the sensibility from which assessment proceeds, or it is philosophically useless" (p. 71) prepares the way for, years later, in Part Four (the final, longest part) of *The Claim of Reason*, my recognition that at some stage in that part, the role of the *Investigations* is no longer one of being interpreted (cp. *The Claim of Reason*, p. xv). I would say now that this recognition was one of finding that an object of interpretation has become a means of interpretation, and the one because of the other. This became true of Austin for me earlier than of Wittgenstein, and it seems to me true in varying degrees of every writer (of what person or object not?) that I have ever taken with seriousness. Some of course prove to be more fruitful, or fateful, than others.

But while I had gained, from writing "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," what I felt was a usable sense of the depth of *Philosophical Investigations*, I was still far from seeing how to articulate this sense with the details of that text. I had, however, enough confidence now to make a beginning of a new dissertation that had been forming in my mind and in my notes on the relation between epistemology and ethics, or knowledge and the justification of confrontation, call it the articulation of the standing from which to question conduct and character, of oneself and of another, in differentiation from the standing to confront claims to knowledge. The main courses I offered in 1959-60, on Wittgenstein and on moral philosophy, were conscious preparations for the writing out of the ideas of the dissertation, so that when I began the consecutive writing, in the fall of 1960, even though I was still teaching full time, the dissertation was completed seven months later, namely before the remaining essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* were written.

I mark this moment by citing a formulation, out of sequence, that I find related to those from "The Availability . . ." namely from the Foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, the piece of the book that still seems to me to speak for itself, written as its last, in 1968, within the opening phase of the decades of intellectual turmoil throughout the humanities and their related social sciences, that fill much of the remaining years of the twentieth century. In that phase, the students' call for "relevance" in their studies was at its rawest and most relentless, and the formulation I have in mind is

more or less obviously a response to that cry: “If philosophy is esoteric, that is not because a few men guard its knowledge but because most men guard themselves against it” (*Must We Mean . . . ?*, p. xxvii). It is at the same time a good instance of my manner of invoking an arresting concept, one that has halted me, like esotericism, whose pertinence I felt strongly in connection with ordinary language practice (how could we become alienated from the words closest to us?—but then again, from what others?), but which I would not be able to speak about with much consequence until years later. Of course there seems no way of telling in the moment of such a formulation whether it is intellectually evasive or whether it is understandably to be trusted. What justifies creating junctures at which readers are asked to make such wagers one way or the other?

The academic year 1962–63, in transition to returning to teach at Harvard, was spent on sabbatical leave, and its first fruits were represented by the third essay, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” one of a number invited from younger American philosophers to appear in a volume called *Philosophy in America*. I chose the topic both to identify myself with the arts, which somehow joined in forming my interest in a life in philosophy (perhaps helped by my only once in six years of teaching at Berkeley having taught a course in aesthetics, and then not satisfyingly, and not again, it turned out, for twenty years), and more immediately prompted by the idea of continuing the issue of my relation to my language by relating it to Kant’s idea of my capacity to give objectivity to aesthetic judgments, that is, to trace their distinctive source of necessity and universality. This was meant to open a new path in the continuing effort to illuminate the question whether my judgments of what I mean in speaking (or generally in conducting myself) are a priori or a posteriori. I had nothing further substantial to say about this until my interpretation of criteria in the opening chapters of *The Claim of Reason*, where my relation to my (ordinary) speech is in effect pictured as my chronic expatriation from it, the result of philosophy’s uncontrolled search for, let’s say, purity—as if what philosophy is compelled, like revolted Coriolanus, to say to Rome is, “I banish you.”

Only in stages have I come to see that each of my ventures in and from philosophy bears on ways of understanding the extent to which my relation to myself is figured in my relation to my words. This establishes from the beginning my sense that in appealing from philosophy to, for example, literature, I am not seeking illustrations for truths philosophy already knows, but illumination of philosophical pertinence that philosophy alone has not surely grasped—as though an essential part of its task

must work behind its back. I do not understand such appeals as “going outside” philosophy.

I point to three formulations in “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” that have recurred often in my thoughts and that are characteristic of something I can recognize as my manner, namely to introduce a remark in a guise (calling attention to itself) meant to mark an intuition which I find guiding, or whose obscurity or incompleteness is meant to be undisguised, intended to remind myself in public, as it were, that I find significance here that I have not earned, to which accordingly I know I owe a return. One such formulation is meant to characterize a task of philosophy I find proposed in *Philosophical Investigations*, one I call “undo[ing] the psychologizing of psychology” (“Aesthetic Problems . . .,” p. 91). This thought will be taken further two years later in the essay on Kierkegaard (the sixth of *Must We Mean . . . ?*). The formulation helped me in my ongoing bouts of revising my dissertation, *The Claim to Rationality*, into what became *The Claim of Reason*. It is specifically a way of thinking about what Wittgensteinian criteria and grammar do.

I point, second, to the formulation “Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about” (p. 95), which expresses a desire of mine for philosophy, that it invites me to reason about anything in my experience, anything I find of interest, from philosophy’s wish to inhibit or discount certain interests (say in the arts) or to reform or escape or limit to a minimum of distinct points its recourse to the ordinary, to Beckett’s finding the extraordinary ordinary and Chekhov’s finding the ordinary extraordinary.

A third formulation is “Nothing is more human than to deny them [viz., human necessities]” (p. 96). The human drive to the inhuman, tempting philosophy to the monstrous, is as reasonable and uncompromised a statement of the subject of Part Four of *The Claim of Reason*, as any other I have found. That part is in effect a small book, reflecting on the larger book to which, as it were, it is irreversibly bound, and lies in the background of much of the work I have done since then.

“Austin At Criticism,” the fourth essay of *Must We Mean What We Say?*, was the result of an invitation for a review-essay of Austin’s *Philosophical Papers*, published in 1962, two years after Austin’s death at the age of forty-eight; the essay does not disguise a concluding tone fitting a memorial address. My wish to articulate my undiminished, life-changing gratitude for Austin’s innovations seemed to require articulating my sense of Austin’s refusal (as it struck me) to draw consequences from those innovations that did justice to their radicality. What I found lacking is suggested

in the essay's idea of "terms of criticism," meant to show that Austin's charges or images of philosophers as lazy, wily, drunk with arrogance, etc. cannot, on his own grounds, be taken with philosophical seriousness. On the contrary, they encourage the sense that the appeal to the ordinary is trivial, or eccentric, directed against at most marginal errors in philosophical practice. In *The Claim of Reason*, my charge against Austin is centered on his misconceived claim that his work defeated what I came to call the threat of skepticism. So I want to add here that Austin's work has in recent years taken on renewed significance for me, in various ways: as I came to appreciate more deeply than I had in the past his work on the performative utterance I wished to protect it somewhat from Derrida's distinct but limited admiration of it (in "Signature, Event, Context") and somewhat from its subsequent reception in what in Cultural Studies is called performance theory, where Austin's work plays a more explicit role than for the moment it plays in professional philosophy (where his name is less often mentioned than his work is assumed—his memory lives under what is for me a puzzling grudge); and more recently I have broached the issue of the relation of Austin's treatment of what he calls "slips," in his great essay "Excuses," with what Freud calls slips in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, both thinkers seeing the condition of the human as immersed in a sea of responsibility, Austin wishing to limit responsibility in a way that allows civilized discourse and conduct to continue, Freud to expand it so radically as to require a new vision of the human, of its inevitable turnings from itself that threaten civilized intercourse, as well as of its powers to reason, in unexpected forms, with these threats, to turn back.

I postpone for a moment considering the fifth essay, on Beckett, to mention the three philosophical essays that follow it, the sixth on Kierkegaard, and the seventh and eighth on music. The concluding paragraph of the Kierkegaard essay now reads to me as a response to various issues of meaning what we say, from the sense of Wittgenstein's perception of us as, in philosophizing (hence when not?), estranged from our words, to Heidegger's identification of the everyday as caught up in inauthentic speech, what he (and Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche) calls something like "chatter." The main purpose of the pair on music is to lay out explicitly some issues of the modern, a concept, or perhaps it is hardly more than a recurrent experience of the world and the philosophy it calls for (and the art, and what institution not?) as having decisively but not yet intelligibly changed, as having become strange, that keeps making its appearance throughout the essays of *Must We Mean What We Say?* Why,

although I seem to recall reading music before I could read words, I have not written about music again until fairly recently, and increasingly, is something I am beginning to write about.

The ninth essay, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” written in response to an invitation to respond to Norman Malcolm’s essay “The Privacy of Experience,” represents a decisive step in the line of philosophical work represented by what precedes it. Malcolm’s philosophical honesty and his admiration for Wittgenstein’s achievements prompted from me reaffirmations simultaneously of my roots in analytical philosophy as well as of my conviction in Wittgenstein’s criticism of that mode of philosophizing. Acknowledgment became a recurrent theme of my work from the time of its isolation for attention in “Knowing and Acknowledging” and provides, together with the essay that follows it, on *King Lear* (“The Avoidance of Love”) the title of Part Four of *The Claim of Reason* (“Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance”). Its formulation of the skeptic’s plight as one which in mortality, let’s call it, presents itself as sort of limitation, “a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack” (p. 262), is one I invoke periodically in later work where I speak of “the threat of skepticism” as a sort of human compulsion to over-intellectuality (not simply a Faustian desire to know everything but a demonic will to measure every relation against that of knowing), as it were a natural weakness (to say the least) of the creature enamored of its intelligence.

The *Lear* essay, the tenth and last of the book, together with the essay on Beckett’s *Endgame*, “Ending the Waiting Game”—the two essays, whatever degree of philosophicality they are granted, distinguished from the rest and linked by their constituting readings of incontestably literary works—make up almost two-fifths of the pages of *Must We Mean What We Say?* They were not invited by any field, indeed it was after the Beckett essay had been praised and turned down for publishing by several literary/cultural journals (with requests either to shorten it for an article or lengthen it for a book) that I recognized it would have to help me make its own home. At some point in composing the *Lear* material I felt I saw what this home was going to be. Both of these essays originated in lectures on their respective plays that I had assigned in the large lecture course that the Harvard Department of Philosophy offered in what was called, from 1945 to 1979, General Education; from that time it was replaced in stages by a differently conceived Core Curriculum. Both programs were sophisticated versions of a “distribution requirement” and meant to shape a measure of intellectual community among the undergraduate body at large. I thought of my contribution as a course in reading, a skill prior to

the ability to distinguish among fields of study, and of its mission as providing an introduction to philosophy for those who may or may not go (or have gone) on to a career in the profession of philosophy. But these intentions do not in themselves warrant calling these somewhat unplaceable essays philosophical.

My sense that they are to be understood so arose negatively from the realization that they fit into no standing idea of a literary essay, a sense confirmed explicitly in recent years by several literary scholars and critics of Shakespeare who have reported their experience of strangeness upon encountering the *Lear* piece when it first appeared. Positively, it would not be until completing *The Claim of Reason* that I could claim explicitly of a Shakespearean tragic hero that his fate is bound up with a process philosophy calls skepticism. And not until writing the Introduction to the collection of my essays on six plays of Shakespeare, *Disowning Knowledge*, in the mid-1980s, would I find that I could fully articulate the fact and the way that the principal concepts that govern my reading of *Othello*, which closes *The Claim of Reason*, though they are not marked as technical, had been developed with increasing pertinence across the pages of the book that precede it, in characterizing the process, or call it the problematic, of skepticism with respect to the existence of others.

That the concepts which in my writing do the work of theory are not distinguished as technical, or given technical restrictions, may be expressed as saying that for philosophy, as I care about it most, ordinary language is no less or more an object of interpretation than a means of interpretation, and the one because of the other.

It could, I think, also justly be said of the texture and progress of the *Lear* essay, which closes *Must We Mean What We Say?*, that it works out, in terms developed in sketching the idea of acknowledgment in the essay that precedes it, the consequences, which prove tragic, of the avoidance of acknowledgment, work which as it were completes the analysis of acknowledgment as philosophy had come upon it. But that evidently was not something the author of *Must We Mean What We Say?* was capable then of saying. In that sense he can be said not to have known what he was doing.

What I did seem to know about what I was doing, namely, that I was glad to have reached the point of entrusting a book to the world (something my teacher Austin had never done, something a number of philosophers I admired in my generation working in relation to analytical philosophy had never done, have until now, I believe, not done), I indicated in the Foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, where my

tone of, let me say, anxious elation, as of finding myself roughly intact, dreams evidently alive after many chances to disparage them, seems to have found responsive chords in others who have also had to be patient longer than they had figured to begin to see their attraction to philosophy manifest itself in work of their own, in however unpredictable forms. This unpredictability may be linked with my impression, mentioned near the beginning of this new Preface, that with the appearance of *Must We Mean What We Say?* even the public discussion of its opening two papers subsided—as if I had put together a book in such a way that it asked to be accepted or rejected as a whole. While I cannot deny such an impulse in myself, I must add that it also makes me happy to learn that the individual parts of it continue to find acceptance sufficient to warrant the reissuing of the whole.

I did discover something further a year after completing the book, on a fellowship at Wesleyan's Humanities Center, about the effect on myself of putting the book behind me, or perhaps I should say, of having it to stand behind. Its independence of me freed me for I suppose the most productive, or palpably so, nine months of my life, in which I recast the salvageable and necessary material of my Ph.D. dissertation as the opening three parts of what would become *The Claim of Reason* and completed small books on film (*The World Viewed*) and Thoreau (*The Senses of Walden*). I consider those small books to form a trio with *Must We Mean What We Say?*, different paths leading from the same desire for philosophy. I think of *Must We Mean . . . ?* as a lucky book, not because, as in other instances, it came so quickly, or else with so much difficulty that it is easy to imagine its never coming to pass. I call it, on its title page, a Book of Essays, having found that the interaction of the essays, despite the differences of their causes, have the feel of a sequence of chapters as much as a collection of independent texts. It is a texture I am glad of and feel lucky to have managed, supposing it is there; but lucky most distinctly in not having had, for institutional or professional reasons, to rush a book into print before I had one I felt lucky in having. (It would have been nice for me if this had all happened years earlier than it did; but that would have required a different life, nicer or not.)

My gratitude to the book in hand, associated with this surprise at its existence, is somehow expressed in a fact I learned of some years after hearing little about any consequences its publication may have had, namely, that two large libraries, one on each coast, had listed the book among those that had been repeatedly stolen, and consequently were no longer to be reordered for their catalogues. Moved as I am by the fantasm