

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aesthetics and Autobiography in Cavell

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Stanley Cavell is one of very few philosophers who systematically reflect on the impact and influence of autobiographical detail, experience, and preferences on their philosophical work. The aim of this essay is to show how Cavell's use of autobiographical exploration is rooted in his early aesthetic theory, in particular his view of the similarities between philosophy and aesthetic criticism. Cavell argues that criticism starts by exploiting and incorporating a subjective vantage point, eventually bringing the reader to test the significance of a work on herself. In his 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', Cavell states exactly this form of appeal to the 'We' of author and reader as the basic move of his own version of 'ordinary language philosophy'. It is because of the connections Cavell sees between criticism and philosophy that his aesthetic diagnosis harks back on his overall critical style of thinking.

Keywords: Stanley Cavell; autobiography; art criticism; ordinary language; aesthetic reasons; philosophical style

It is common prejudice that philosophical reflection involves strict abstraction from the person of the writer putting it in words and on paper. Philosophy, so it seems, is a matter of interpersonally acceptable intuitions, arguments, and insights; as such it is virtually independent of its actual manner of expression. Autobiographies and memoirs, on the other hand, provide the interested public with supplementary tales to reconcile the man (most of the time) and his thought, a life and its achievement, usually from the vantage point of advanced age. In this picture, there is a neat division between theory and personality, both are to be dealt with in different accounts. Stanley Cavell is one of but a few philosophers who not only make use of, but also systematically reflect on, autobiographical writing not just as a way of making themselves known, but as a way of doing philosophy. Although this is clearly most visible in his 2010 memoir *Little Did I Know*, and most explicitly theoretically spelled out around a decade before in *A Pitch of Philosophy*, it is a thread running through the corpus of Cavell's work. Concerning this systematic application of autobiography to philosophy, he is of course conscious of his precedents, not only in that he explicitly acknowledges their impact, but in that his writing incorporates several forms of autobiographical voices: Sometimes it is confessional in a way Saint Augustine's and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's seminal philosophical autobiographies are. Sometimes it is boastful and self-centered, thus in line with Friedrich

Nietzsche's hyperbolic *Ecce Homo*. In its best moments, though, it is perhaps closest to the way Walter Benjamin blends philosophical reflection and autobiographical narration, in *Berlin Childhood*, *One-Way Street*, or in his unfinished *Arcades Project*. Just like Benjamin is interested in autobiographical writing not for its own sake, but as a means to obtain truths from the ephemeral and exemplary, from memory and its forms of focusing and neglecting, Cavell's interest, similarly, maintains a simultaneous focus on the style and method of philosophical reflection.

I will argue that Cavell's use of autobiography is grounded in the aesthetic underpinnings of his very philosophical method. This will involve a discussion of the use of autobiographical methods in relation to aesthetics. In particular, I will reflect on the role of the autobiographical in theorizing art. In the course of these reflections, I will pay close attention to Cavell's philosophy. Thus, I will first bring to mind the position and significance of autobiographical remarks or allusions in Cavell's aesthetics. Second, I will briefly summarize Cavell's ideas concerning the overall connection between ordinary language, philosophy, and autobiography, and argue for how his defence of autobiographical methods in philosophy is shaped by his views about art and criticism as well as his emphasis on philosophical style, or voice. Third, I will broaden the scope and point to some consequences or reverberations of Cavell's suggestions for aesthetics – and philosophy – in general.

I

Cavell's aesthetics, to begin with, is no unified and easily accessible piece of theory, but is to be retrieved from the bulk of his writings. As I have reconstructed elsewhere, the cornerstone of his philosophy of art is laid in his early essays and books about theatre, cinema, and contemporary (modernist) art.¹ Above all, these are his studies on contemporary music and criticism, 'Music Discomposed' and 'A Matter of Meaning It', as well as his essays on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, 'Ending the Waiting Game', and on William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, 'The Avoidance of Love', all of them included in his early collection of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?*. It is safe to say that almost all of the lines of thought developed in these early texts meet in Cavell's first book on film, *The World Viewed*, which forms the largest study he devoted exclusively to the theory of a single art form. The book is known as outstandingly complex and it knits together quite a bunch of subjects. Among them are not only the ontology of film the book promises in its subtitle, but also film's relationship to photography, theatre, and painting (after André Bazin), its inheritance of the narrative conventions of the realist novel, a reading of Baudelaire as a proto-theorist of cinema, a sketch of a theory of artistic modernism, and modernist painting in particular (corresponding to that of Michael Fried), as well as a conception of film as emblem of and redemption from modern scepticism, the latter subject reverberating Cavell's general preoccupations (with modernism and scepticism)² and giving them an aesthetic spin. But running through all these themes, and thus unifying them in an accentuated way, is the thread of autobiography I want to highlight here. Already in the preface of *The World Viewed*, Cavell invokes a strong connection between original experience, autobiographical record, and aesthetic exploration concerning his field of investigation. Here is what he states in the very opening paragraph:

¹ See Jochen Schuff, *Ästhetisches Verstehen: Zugänge zur Kunst nach Wittgenstein und Cavell* (Paderborn: Fink, 2019), esp. Part II. See also Jay M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), chap. 3.

² See Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 81.

Memories of movies are strand over strand with memories of my life. During the quarter of a century (roughly from 1935 to 1960) in which going to the movies was a normal part of my week, it would no more have occurred to me to write a study of movies than to write my autobiography. Having completed the pages that follow, I feel that I have been composing a kind of metaphysical memoir – not the story of a period of my life but an account of the conditions it has satisfied.³

On the face of it, the passage serves to acknowledge the importance of movies in Cavell's life and, consequently, in his memory. We are led to the impression that his memories of his own life and his memories of cinema blend together, and not only in the trivial sense that moviegoing featured among the regular routines of Cavell's life and is therefore naturally remembered. This indiscernibility of memories might be a reason to evoke the concept of autobiography vis-à-vis his relation to the movies: memories of films are ever so often intermixed with (different, 'more real') life memories; accounting for the first comes down to relating the latter. This is why Cavell states that *both* the idea of writing a study of film *and* the idea of writing an autobiography would have occurred alien to him at the time of the original experience. Both writing about a subject one has been deeply involved with and narrating one's life story, I take it, require some sort of distance. Writing about art means distancing the original experience; writing about one's life means taking a step back and bringing events one previously lived through into a writerly order. Both movements involve retrieval and reconstruction. Around a decade after the end of the period of life recalled here, and after eventually having written the study, Cavell finds that to conceptualize cinema as a phenomenon or an art form, it has obviously been necessary to exploit his live autobiographical memory.

Depending on which of its themes you are interested in, there are many itineraries through the chapters of *The World Viewed*. I want to argue that Cavell proposes a privileged one right in its beginning: namely to read the book not only as a piece of theory concerning the problems of film art, but simultaneously as a philosophical questioning of the author's personal memory of his up to then unquestioned experience of a life with movies. In this light, it has to be understood as an autobiographical *as well as* an art-critical narrative. More precisely, it is exactly Cavell's memories of a significant part of his life with films that he puts to analytical scrutiny in his book. In this light, we might see a parallel movement in Sigmund Freud's rendition of the technique of working-through, if we think of it as a repeated reconstruction of memories to the end of achieving deeper insight into a subject.⁴ Or, we might think of Ludwig Wittgenstein's proposal to think of the work of the philosopher as 'assembling reminders for a particular purpose' (das Zusammentragen von Erinnerungen zu einem bestimmten Zweck),⁵ a remark which can also be read, in turn, as acknowledging the impact of Freud's psychoanalytic technique on Wittgenstein's thinking. Note, in this context, Cavell's insistence on supporting his observations with his *memories* of films, rather than with more 'objective' data.⁶ Read this way, *The World Viewed* brings autobiographical moments to the surface which form

³ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), xix.

⁴ See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 488–89.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), § 127.

⁶ See Cavell, *World Viewed*, x, xxiv.

the raw material of an aesthetic analysis, confronting them, repeatedly, with the instruments of reflection and abstraction.

I take it as a reinforcement of this reading proposal that the first chapter of *The World Viewed* bears the title 'An Autobiography of Companions'. However, it is not easy to grasp the multiple layers of significance of this heading. Even more so since, rather irritatingly, the chapter starts with a reference to Leo Tolstoy's aesthetics – which is a piece of theory hardly ever read as a serious contribution to philosophy of art, but instead generally taken to be one big conceptual confusion.⁷ Cavell, for his part, claims to have gained from Tolstoy's book not so much systematic insights but a specific attitude towards the investigation of the arts, a certain point of view:

Tolstoy is asking himself not about the nature of art, but about the nature of the importance of art. It was when I came to see that these are not separate questions – that the answer to the question 'What is the importance of art?' is grammatically related to, or is a way of answering, the question 'What is art?' – that I came to an understanding of what Tolstoy was talking about, and came to comprehend further ranges in my caring about art.⁸

This passage from *The World Viewed* is neither the only instance, nor is it the first one, in which Cavell refers to Tolstoy's book on art.⁹ Whenever he does so, Cavell highlights Tolstoy's insistence on the personal impact of art, and especially on his criterium that art has to be of real importance, or else is merely counterfeit, or fraudulent.¹⁰ This importance Tolstoy is talking about, Cavell emphasizes, is above all a kind of personal importance, coloured by the paradigmatically shared experience of, in the given case, moviegoing. So much so, that biographical review does not only bring to light the event of seeing a film in company, but, as it were, a whole world partly consisting of the memory of films. The way one's point of view is altered by the experience of artworks is thus non-repeatable, tied to a particular point in time and space, and above all, relative to the medium in question. In this vein, it almost seems as if the films themselves were the companions mentioned in the chapter's heading. To shed further light on the case of movies, Cavell contrasts his experience of reading a novel:

I don't care whether anyone quite knows the week of awe I spent at the age of twelve reading *Les Misérables*; there are always twelve-year-olds and there is always that book for them. But movies, unless they are masterpieces, are not there as they were. The hours – through the Laughton-Gable *Mutiny on the Bounty*; *The Crusades*; *Union Pacific*; *Dawn Patrol*; *Captain Blood*; *Algiers*; *Charlie Chan* [...]; *Murder, My Sweet*; *White Heat*; and a hundred others – were hours and days of awe; momentous, but only for the moment; unrecapturable fully except in memory and evocation; gone. If you see them now for the first time, you may be interested and moved, but you can't know what I know.¹¹

⁷ See Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, trans. Richard Pevear (London: Penguin Books, 1995); Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 2, *The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 290–96.

⁸ Cavell, *World Viewed*, 3–4.

⁹ Earlier references can be found in Stanley Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 181–82, and 'A Matter of Meaning It', in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 206–7.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', 189; 'A Matter of Meaning It', 224.

¹¹ Cavell, *World Viewed*, 10.

To be sure, this is no general account of features of works of art, but a reconstruction of the individual importance of individual moments of aesthetic experience, even if, taken together, they constitute a huge reservoir of memory. Cavell gestures towards what he takes the term 'importance' to mean in this context: first, there is the individual significance of the medium of movies, as such and in its instances, in immediate experience. Second, there is its demand to recapture the reaction it evokes, to put it in words, or in short: a demand for criticism. What emerges here as calling for autobiographical methods in aesthetics is the wish to get to the depths of the individual (because simultaneously shared) experience vis-à-vis this particular artwork (as part of the history of this particular medium).

But doesn't all of this entail plain aesthetic subjectivism? True, acknowledging the impact and influence of the autobiographical, as Cavell does, self-consciously counters any ideas of neutrality and independence of writer and theory advocated above all, though far from exclusively, by analytic philosophy (hence analytic aesthetics). Cavell's constant attention to his own writerly style as well as his recurring interest in questions of voice support this reading. However, Cavell sees neutrality in this sense as neither possible nor desirable, instead he argues to the contrary effect, I want to claim, that aesthetics can only be properly understood and conducted by exploiting and incorporating a subjective vantage point. This is because aesthetics, in his view, cannot be separated from the task of criticism. Or, to put it differently: it is exactly the connection between experience (reaction) and judgement (criticism), between aesthetic subject and the public sphere of taste that should be seen as a model for philosophical reflection.

II

This connection between aesthetics and criticism features centrally in Cavell's early and seminal essay, 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy'. Introducing two examples – namely, the question of whether it is possible to paraphrase a poem and the question of whether new, so-called atonal music lacks discernible connection to its traditions, which makes it questionable whether it is to be called music in the first place – Cavell discusses the relation between the content of artworks and the ways we (are compelled to) talk about them. In the course of this discussion, he distinguishes between the critic's competence to discern and argue for the aesthetic value of an object or event as opposed to the mere agreement with the taste of his time and place.¹² Of course, it is Immanuel Kant's conception of aesthetic judgement that figures in the background, and Cavell is particularly interested in its core tension between subjective judgement and its claim to objectivity. But Cavell reads Kant's description, unconventionally, in terms of the linguistic practices underlying both art and its criticism. Only the ability to give reasons for an aesthetic judgement, to describe, interpret, and criticize features of an object or event, can ground the claim to consent that makes it an aesthetic judgement in the first place.¹³ This is where the ability to put my own experience in words comes in. 'The problem of the critic,' Cavell writes, 'as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways.'¹⁴ I will return to Cavell's reading of Kant in a minute, but let me first unpack this quote a little further, since I am convinced that it can contribute greatly to understanding how Cavell conceives of aesthetics and its methods. Moreover, it sketches how 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', in accord with other early essays, serves to ground Cavell's own idea of

¹² Stanley Cavell, 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 88.

¹³ See Jennifer A. McMahon, 'The Sense of Community in Cavell's Conception of Aesthetic and Moral Judgment', *Conversations*, no. 2 (2014): 52.

¹⁴ Cavell, 'Aesthetic Problems', 94.

an ordinary language philosophy, understood as an investigation of the linguistic constitution of our shared form of life.

Now, in the first part of the quote, Cavell claims that there is a parallel movement in the creation of art and in the methods of criticism; and that it affects the critic as well as the artist. In either case, Cavell states, subjectivity has to be *included*, which he thinks constitutes, again in either case, a problem. It seems more obvious that there is something problematic to be solved or overcome in the case of the *artist*. She will have to 'master' her subjectivity, which I suppose means to form a reflective awareness of her personal experience as the particular experience it is. And she will have to give it an exemplary form, which I understand means to make it artistically meaningful and comprehensible for her audience. (*This* matching of respective subjectivities of artist and beholder is, even if spelled out rather clumsily in terms of an emotional 'infection', at the very heart of Tolstoy's aesthetic expressivism. Again, it is this core idea of Tolstoy's account that Cavell is sympathetic to.) It is less obvious, however, in what way the subjectivity of the *critic* could be meant to be 'included' and 'mastered'. Now, considering Cavell's introductory remarks in *The World Viewed*, the critic's challenge may also be understood to consist in her making her own experience exemplary: which is to say the individual, non-repeatable experience of a particular work of art in a particular (biographical) situation. In this vein, Cavell's own practice of writing philosophical film readings, in his later film books *Pursuits of Happiness* or *Contesting Tears*, both focusing on samples of classic movies from the Golden Era of Hollywood studio production, radically starts from his personal cinematic upbringing, experience, taste, and memory. In these books, his drawing on examples does not simply serve as an illustration to colour aesthetic investigations, but is meant to shape their very structure. It is even meant to let the experience of art interfere with and disrupt the course of philosophical theorizing, to establish a critical dialogue between work and text. In a later kind of résumé of his work in aesthetics, Cavell highlights accordingly 'the sort of emphasis I place on the criticism, or reading, of individual works of art. I think of this emphasis,' he adds, 'as letting a work of art have a voice in what philosophy says about it [...].'¹⁵ In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell most clearly describes his approach to philosophical criticism of given works as a kind of extension of conversations about individual experiences:

[T]o take an interest in an object is to take an interest in one's experience of the object, so that to examine and defend my interest in these films is to examine and defend my interest in my own experience, in the moments and passages of my life I have spent with them. This in turn means, for me, defending the process of criticism, so far as criticism is thought of, as I think of it, as a natural extension of conversation.¹⁶

This passage once again recalls the autobiographical beginning of *The World Viewed* I quoted before in emphasizing not only the importance of the 'moments and passages of my life' in which the aesthetic encounters have taken place, but also the fact that the beginning of criticism is to be found in companionship and conversation, in a characteristically communal and shared form of experience, or – one that is essentially public. Criticism does not review personal experience for its own sake but makes an offer for taking this experience as an exemplary one. Thus, my description of my experience is supposed to work as an invitation to you to test the conclusions of my criticism on yourself and your own taste, to see if you, as the

¹⁵ Cavell, 'Something Out of the Ordinary', in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 226.

¹⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 7.

viewer, listener, or beholder you are, will be inclined to accept or to dispute my claims.¹⁷ This is the key to how criticism connects the subjectivity of our judgements with the objectivity of aesthetic value. Again, the point is made most explicit in 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy'. In this essay, Cavell draws a connection between his methods and Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and its account of the structure of aesthetic judgement, especially of the form Kant calls reflective judgement of taste. Kant conceives of this form of judgement as being subjective on the one hand, but nonetheless appealing to universal consent on the other: 'The judgment of taste determines its object with regard to satisfaction (as beauty) with a claim to the assent of *everyone*, as if it were objective. To say "This flower is beautiful" is the same as merely to repeat its own claim to everyone's satisfaction.'¹⁸

But not only is this an appropriation of Kant's argument – Cavell significantly enriches the account of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* by relating it to the underlying language games. He adds a much stronger emphasis on the intersubjectivity of criticism and on the possibilities of acknowledgement and refusal of given aesthetic reasons. But even more than that, Cavell claims that aesthetic judgement and criticism structurally resemble the claim to consent the philosopher aims at when she issues statements about the meaning of terms and propositions. The 'I' of her claim demands that 'We', every one of us, accept it, too:

Kant's 'universal voice' is, with perhaps a slight shift of accent, what we hear recorded in the philosopher's claims about 'what we say': such claims are at least as close to what Kant calls aesthetical judgments as they are to ordinary hypotheses. [...] I wish to suggest that it is a claim or dependence of the same kind.¹⁹

So, analogous to the structure of aesthetic criticism, the appeal to the 'We' of both author and reader can be seen as the basic move of Cavell's own understanding of an 'ordinary language philosophy', which he works out, influenced by his readings of John L. Austin and Wittgenstein, as an investigation of our common and everyday use of language as well as our (common and everyday) alienation from it. This is the point by way of which Cavell's view of aesthetic understanding more or less explicitly forms the basis of his philosophical approach as a whole. It also leads back to the methodological idea I pointed to by quoting the autobiographical beginning of *The World Viewed*, because it is exactly the reason for Cavell's insistence on making his personal experience heard. Timothy Gould points out how the problematization of the relation of 'I' and 'We' in Cavell forms the philosophical basis of his use of autobiographical remarks and exercises:

Cavell's interest in the relation of autobiography to philosophy begins with his attending to the philosopher's use of 'We'. [...] [W]hatever impulses to autobiography may animate Cavell's work, one of the most central impulses is methodological [...]. He does not explore the intricacies and the evasions of the 'I' solely for its own sake: he is always also exploring the relation of the 'I' and the 'We', of the philosopher's ability to claim accord based on nothing more than the self-critical understanding of his or her own representativeness.²⁰

¹⁷ See Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 23–26.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), § 32.

¹⁹ Cavell, 'Aesthetic Problems', 94.

²⁰ Timothy Gould, 'Me, Myself, and Us: Autobiography and Method in the Work of Stanley Cavell', *Conversations*, no. 1 (2013): 4–5.

Gould not only links this attention to the connection of 'I' and 'We' to Cavell's reading of Kant in 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', and thus to his view of aesthetic judgement and criticism, but also to the themes of scepticism, alienation, and acknowledgement. Cavell's philosophy as a whole revolves around, most extensively in *The Claim of Reason*. I noted before that Cavell conceives of ordinary language as the language we are at once always already at home in, while simultaneously always already alienated from. The existential threat of scepticism Cavell works out in this book is not so much an epistemic problem concerning our (doubtful) knowledge of the world and the others in it, but it is the all-too-human impulse to avoid confrontation with either, and thus to avoid self-recognition in the things and beings around me. This avoidance, to be sure, is frequently effective in the realm of philosophy, in philosophers' efforts to make language more precise – inhumanly precise, as it were. In this view, Cavell's stylistic efforts to repeatedly return to the exemplary and the everyday are intended as a form of philosophical therapy, shaped, as I pointed out above, by Cavell's understanding of Freud's and Wittgenstein's methods. This way, as Gould sums up, an autobiographically infused style of writing can serve to show us our position in relation to ourselves and thus enhance our self-understanding: 'Autobiography becomes philosophical at least in part as a counter movement to human evasiveness. That is, autobiography is not just the story of someone's life but a kind of written concentration of it.'²¹

Cavell offers the most detailed reflections on how he conceives of the relationship between autobiography and philosophy in his 1992 Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures, published as *A Pitch of Philosophy*. These lectures revolve around questions of pitch, that is, themes of style, tone, and voice in philosophy, not only in relation to the autobiographical, but also in relation to the artform of the opera, and in relation to the infamous 1970s debate between Jacques Derrida and John Searle about their readings of Austin's philosophy. In the first part, however, Cavell grounds his reflections on autobiography and philosophy in an acknowledgement of his own indebtedness to Austin's methods, which can be read, again, as an emphasis on the relation of 'I' and 'We'. Simultaneously, it is a kind of autobiographical tracing back of his own thinking to his teacher's, and hence the tradition it is rooted in. The recourse to autobiography, that is, is inherent in any philosophical attention to the ordinary of our language. Which is exactly the fact that gives philosophy its oft-noted peculiar status between science and literature, between the description of our linguistic practices and a kind of self-exploration as language user:

Philosophers who proceed as Austin suggests will not be much interested to poll others for their opinion about such crossroads. [...] Their basis is autobiographical, but they evidently take what they do and say to be representative or exemplary of the human condition as such. In this way they interpret philosophy's arrogance as the arrogation of the right to speak for us, to say whatever there is to say in the human resistance to the drag of metaphysics and of skepticism; and authorize that arrogation in the claim to representativeness, expressed autobiographically.²²

The question of the relationship between philosophy and literature, between the quest for intersubjective truths and the need for an individual voice, or tone, or pitch, to express it, however, is the note already *The Claim of Reason* ends on, leaving open the question of whether philosophy can ever become (that is to say, I think, gain the expressive means of) literature

²¹ Gould, 'Me, Myself, and Us', 15.

²² Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 8.

without losing itself.²³ In *The Claim of Reason*, the question is a result of the way Cavell finds the attraction as well as the threat of the other pictured concisely in Shakespeare's plays, and so it aims at whether philosophy can find a way to express these facts for itself. In his later variation of the same problem, it is rather the subjective truth of the commonness of my life that prompts the question. The model of judging and criticizing art points to this intersection of my subjectivity and our common world and understanding. Incorporating the autobiographical in philosophical expression is thus seen as one of the basic challenges of the endeavour of self-reflection. Cavell makes it more than obvious that this works both ways:

The autobiographical dimension of philosophy is internal to the claim that philosophy speaks for the human, for all; that is its necessary arrogance. The philosophical dimension of autobiography is that the human is representative, say imitative, that each life is exemplary of all, a parable of each; that is humanity's commonness, which is internal to its endless denials of commonness.²⁴

So, concerning this acknowledgement of, we might say, the arrogance of the exemplar, we can see a trajectory from Cavell's earliest essays to *Little Did I Know*, in which he, eventually, tells the philosophical story of the exemplary life of Stanley Cavell (or: the exemplary story of the philosophical life of Stanley Cavell).²⁵ Throughout the course of his work in and outside aesthetics, Cavell uses autobiographical elements not just for decoration and anecdote. On the contrary, as I have shown, right from the start they play a systematic role at the basis of his thinking.

III

Up to this point, I highlighted several strains of recourse to autobiography in Cavell's work. I particularly argued that his making use of autobiographical material as a way of doing philosophy is grounded in his early texts on aesthetics, which are concerned with connections between the value of art and the language of criticism. And I argued that the general idea of Cavell's – as we might call it – argument from the autobiographical is shaped by these aesthetic reflections. But even if you grant this, you might still object that all of my results concern the thematic preferences and stylistic idiosyncrasies of a single author rather than something of general value for aesthetic theory, let alone philosophical reflection in general. In my concluding remarks, I will defend the view that, by way of incorporating autobiographical reflection in his philosophical method, Cavell aims at a critical philosophy, which means that it is, first of all, critical of itself, aware of its own conditions. As a matter of fact, the term 'philosophy' carries the same ambivalence in Cavell as it does in Wittgenstein: Both use it, on the one hand, in order to classify traditional forms of philosophical conceptions which, in their views, characteristically misunderstand the conceptions' very problems or wrongly estimate their scope. But they also use it, on the other hand, to refer to their own respective methods and ideas, thus proposing a revisionary form of philosophy (or at least a revisionary understanding of its traditions). The aesthetic slant to Cavell's philosophy, then, involves a critique of traditional methods, emphasizing instead the importance of matters of style and voice – which is to say the aesthetic problems of philosophy itself, taken as its own subject matter:

²³ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 496.

²⁴ Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, 10–11.

²⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Consider that philosophy's distrust of, or ambivalence toward, the autobiographical, or personal, is characteristically expressed in its sense that an attention to style in writing – we might say signature – is a sign of the unphilosophical, unless perhaps it is plainly marked as an escapable diversion.²⁶

If this is an accurate diagnosis, the aesthetic self-critique of philosophy Cavell is putting forth harks back to a proper understanding of philosophical aesthetics.²⁷ Which makes philosophy of art much less harmless or peripheric an enterprise than one might suppose at first glance. Rather, its very outlines specifically point to, and embody, philosophy's general tension between the subjective and objective, between the attention to phenomena and the reflection on our very basic understandings.²⁸

Perhaps it is even characteristic of the best philosophies concerned with modernist or contemporary art that they, at some point, get personal – Cavell's is of course not the only example in this respect. Making room for the autobiographical serves to acknowledge the taste and education that shapes the formation of one's theory, that is it lays open its autobiographical undercurrents. But that is also to say that theories of that kind acknowledge the significance of criticism for any theorizing of art. Let me just remind you, exemplarily, of Arthur Danto's repeatedly told and almost mythical tale of his visit to Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* show in New York 1964,²⁹ or of Alva Noë's accounts, in *Strange Tools*, of his own encounters with various works of art and of his growing up in the Greenwich Village art scene of the 1970s. Rendering a detailed account of his artistic upbringing, Noë is straightforward in acknowledging the autobiographical undercurrents of his own art theory:

I tell all this not to drop names but because, looking back on it now, I want to acknowledge how remarkable it is to have grown up in this art community. I also put down these personal memories because they help me to state my motivation to undertake the research of this book. For me, art isn't just another phenomenon to which I can apply my theory. It is personal. The question of art, the question of why it matters, what it is, how it figures in our lives, is in some ways my very first problem in philosophy.³⁰

The core situation of aesthetic theorizing is a matter of personal history (which is to say memory), so there is a special position here for its autobiographical re-telling as an individual situation. Thus, I will always have to argue from the impact a work has had on me to its aesthetic value. In that sense, aesthetics is inseparably connected to the criticism of individual artworks. But in the same sense, it is always connected to narratives sorting what we experience as art in an historic course. I am convinced that Hegel's aesthetics, in its dynamic extension of Kant's ideas, aims at doing philosophical justice to the inherent historicity of art exactly by constantly blending art criticism and philosophical analysis. As such, it is the

²⁶ Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, 14.

²⁷ Simo Säätelä argues for a parallel movement in Wittgenstein in his 'Aesthetics – Wittgenstein's Paradigm of Philosophy?', *Aisthesis* 4 (2013): 35–53.

²⁸ This point is made extraordinarily clear by Christoph Menke in his very short essay on 'Die Möglichkeit der Ästhetik', in *Denken und Disziplin: Workshop der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Ästhetik* (2017), ed. Juliane Rebentisch, http://www.dgae.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/dgaeX_dud_menke.pdf.

²⁹ See, for instance, Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), vi–viii; *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 5–7.

³⁰ Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 208.

inevitable model for every attempt to make our contemporary experience of art explicit – although this is a story to be told elsewhere.³¹

It is the art of and after modernism, however, in the realm of which Cavell's observations show their importance all the more, because here, as Cavell, Danto, and Noë (as well as Theodor W. Adorno, for that matter) all argue, the constitution of the work of art makes it characteristically obvious that its very nature cannot be separated from the process of criticism, call it interpretation, reading, or understanding. From this vantage point, the employment of the autobiographical is a way of acknowledging the irreducible subjective core of criticism, hence aesthetic theory. When it comes to the arts, theorizing remains empty without recourse to experience, which I think goes to say: my own personal experience in the encounter with a work of art or another aesthetic object.

This tension between the elusiveness of the object and the obtrusiveness of my critical subjectivity is the central problem of modernity, the one that Cavell frames with his concept of scepticism. Since it is the central problem of modernity, a modernist philosophy would, first of all, have to acknowledge its own status, that is, self-critically incorporate its conditions. The model for such an acknowledgement of its own conditions are the modernist arts, constantly reflecting on and thereby transforming their media. It is obvious that Cavell sees Wittgenstein's and Austin's methods as paradigmatic for the achievement of modern philosophical self-critique – and that he, in his own writing, strives to appropriate their spirit. This spirit runs counter, of course, to the alleged neutrality of philosophical argument, precisely, as Jay Bernstein argues, by declining conclusiveness:

The most direct way in which modernist philosophy reveals its distance from the ideal type of legal-rational authority has been via its fragmentary form. The fragment defies subordination from first premises; but it is just the structure of subordination (from first premises or from an ideal method or procedure) that constitutes the purely rational authority of the ideal-type analytic philosophy.³²

In Bernstein's account, too, this characteristic of Cavell's critique of philosophy has its roots in his aesthetic theory. Consequently, Bernstein is eventually led to the question of the subjective, or autobiographical voice in Cavell. He frames this question, interestingly, by referring to just the passage in 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy' I quoted above:

What if we say that the force of the philosophical fragment derives from the voice or person of the philosopher, where this is understood as the philosopher mastering her subjectivity and making it exemplary? [...] And if there is going to be something corresponding to the sensuousness of the artwork, the singular voice is a plausible candidate. And how better to rebel against the self-righteous impersonality of the analytic ideal-type?³³

In the last instance, Bernstein rather avoids to answer this question, because he seems to doubt the philosophical value of autobiographical speech. However, instead of arguing for this judgement, he turns to highlight the aphoristic beauty of an exemplary remark of

³¹ A version of such an account is developed in Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), esp. chap. 2. Some further thoughts concerning this idea can be found in the chapter on 'Nachträglichkeit' in Schuff, *Ästhetisches Verstehen*, 153–73.

³² Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, 109.

³³ *Ibid.*, 111.

Cavell's taken from one of his film readings. It is true, as Bernstein claims, that the force of the fragment as such derives from its confrontation or constellation with something else: be it a text, be it a work of art. My point, however, is exactly to show how such constellations are, inevitably, informed and shaped by personal history and experience. In my reading, this is what Cavell confronts us with in his autobiographical endeavours. He lays bare the aesthetic difficulties of having to put forth our own writing against the background of tradition and contemporary fashion, against our own time, as it were.³⁴ The unresolved modernist challenge remains that these claims to philosophical truth are as inherently contestable as the artist's formal choices or the conflicting versions of autobiographical narration themselves.

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³⁴ See Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 10.

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