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Just Being Difficult?

Academic Writing in the Public Arena

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Bad Writing and Good Philosophy

I BEGAN WORK on this topic for a conference at the University of London on style in philosophy. The organizers suggested that I address the question of what it is for a piece of philosophy to be badly written—no doubt thinking that as a reader of French philosophers, I would have special expertise on this question or at least a lot of relevant experience.

In fact, I was happy to take up this question because I have been intrigued of late by claims made in the world of Anglophone philosophy about bad writing. The journal *Philosophy and Literature*, edited by an Australian philosopher, Denis Dutton, had for several years announced a Bad Writing Award, and since this award had recently been conferred on a sentence by Judith Butler that appeared in *Diacritics* during my stint as editor, I had a personal interest in the concept of bad writing in philosophy and the criteria of selection. What counts as bad writing for this journal? What were the parameters of their Bad Writing Contest?

This contest was conducted for four years, and the prize was always awarded to someone well known, never to analytical philosophers but always to someone involved with Marxist, feminist, or postcolonial theory: Fredric Jameson, Roy Bhaskar, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler. The contest attempts "to locate the ugliest, most stylistically awful passage found in a scholarly book or article published in the last few years." In an article in the *Wall Street Journal* Denis Dutton explains: "The rules were simple: Entries should be a sentence or two from an actual published scholarly book or journal article. No translations into English allowed, and the entries had to be nonironic."[1] I was surprised to learn that the editor asked only to see a sentence or two. When the *New York Times* phoned me for my reaction to Butler's receiving the award, I said that it seemed to me a matter of bad faith to take a single sentence out of context and charge it with obfuscation; I hadn't realized that

this was actually the basis of the contest.[2] What if, for example, the sentence uses jargon that has just been explained?

I confess that it had never occurred to me that one ought to be able to understand every sentence of a work of philosophy in isolation, that every sentence should be clear *in and of itself*, that ugliness and impenetrability can be assessed independently of what comes before. I wondered whether only theorists of a continental persuasion produced sentences that failed this test, and I thought I would take a look, in a negative version of *sortes vergilianae*.

The first book I took down from the shelf was one with a good reputation, which I had always meant to read—Robert Nozick's *Philosophical Explanations*. Although Nozick sometimes writes highly technical philosophy, he has achieved a broad audience, and this book takes on large questions of interest to many people (its chapters are "The Identity of the Self," "Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing," "Knowledge and Skepticism," "Free Will," "Foundations of Ethics," and "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life"). But the first page to which I turned, in the opening chapter, on the identity of the self, contained this sentence:

> We have said that W is a whole relative to parts $p_1, \ldots, p_n$ when the closest continuer of W need not be the sum of the closest continuers of the parts p_i, when (a) it is possible that the closest continuer of W exists yet does not contain as a part some existing closest continuer of one of the p_i's; or (b) it is possible that the closest continuer of W exists and contains some part q that is not a closest continuer of any of the p_i (nor a sum or other odd carving up of these); or (c) it is possible that at some later time no continuer of W is close enough to be it, even though each of the p_i then has a continuer close enough to be it—the parts exist at the later time but the whole does not.[3]

This is certainly ugly, awkward, and hard to follow (a potential prizewinner, I should have thought!), but of course one *can* follow it if one is interested in the project of trying, with elaborate invented examples, to work out what logically would have to be the case for some y to count as a continuation of x and all the conceivable configurations that might complicate such ascriptions of identity. Having found enough sentences like this to assure myself that analytic philosophy is not necessarily more graceful, witty, and comprehensible than other sorts and that looking for sentences that by themselves are ugly and opaque is not a very good way of evaluating philosophy, I happened to glance at the opening page of Nozick's book, to see if he said anything about the kind of writing he was doing, and here is what I found. The book begins:

> I, too, seek an unreadable book: urgent thoughts to grapple with in agitation and excitement, revelations to be transformed by or to transform, a book incapable of being read straight through, a book even to bring reading to a stop. I have not found that book, or attempted it. Still, I wrote and thought in awareness of it, in the hope that this book would bask in its light.[4]

Prose that basks in the light of the hope of unreadability. That this might be the goal of an eminent analytic philosopher warns us not to take ease of assimilation and transparency as the hallmarks of good writing in philosophy or difficulty as the necessary sign of bad writing.

With this idea in mind let me turn to the winner of the 1999 Bad Writing Prize—a sentence from a brief essay by Judith Butler called "Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time." This essay introduced a conversation between Butler and Ernesto Laclau, whose book *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time* provides the basis for Butler's title. Here is the sentence.

> The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homogeneous ways, to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation, brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibilities of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.[5]

This is not an easy sentence, certainly. Here is what Denis Dutton says about it in commenting on the award: "Kitsch theorists mimic the effects of rigor and profundity without actually doing serious intellectual work. Their jargon-laden prose always suggests but never delivers genuine insight."[6] Then comes Butler's sentence. Dutton continues: "To ask what this means is to miss the point. This sentence beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it."

I think this is complete rubbish, actually. I wonder *who* it is who has failed to do serious intellectual work—such as read Butler's three-page article. Her sentence summarizes, in the third paragraph of the article, why she has taken an interest in Laclau and Mouffe's writing. She first became interested when she realized "that I had found a set of Marxist thinkers for whom discourse was not merely a representation of pre-existing social and historical realities, but was also constitutive of the field of the social and of history."[7] Then she saw that

> central to their notion of articulation, appropriated from Gramsci, was the notion of rearticulation. As a temporally dynamic and relatively unpredictable play of forces, hegemony had been cast by Laclau and Mouffe as an alternative to the static forms of structuralism that tend to construe contemporary social forms as timeless totali-

ties. I read in Laclau and Mouffe the political transcription of Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play": a structure gains its status as a structure, its structurality, only through repeated reinstatements. The dependency of that structure on its reinstatement means that the very possibility of structure depends on a reiteration that is in no sense determined fully in advance, that for structure and social structure as a result to become possible, there must first be a contingent repetition as its basis.

This is important, as she explains later, because if what is dominant in a society depends for its dominance on constant repetition and rearticulation, there may be sites and strategies for altering that repetition and effecting change. In these opening paragraphs Butler identifies sources of concepts and introduces key terms such as *hegemony* and *rearticulation*, noting that for Laclau and Mouffe hegemony is something dynamic, depending on repetition and rearticulation, which keep it going. Then comes the prizewinning sentence summing up why she found their work important.

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Hegemony is a term that seems to provoke strong reactions, and when it appears twice in a sentence, as it does in Butler's, that may seem the height of obfuscation; but this sentence has been well prepared, and it is not hard to explain, although, of course, it would help to have some specific examples involving contingent sites and strategies of power. But we are still on page 1. Butler goes on, on page 2, to establish a link between Laclau's work and her own writing on a particular aspect of hegemony: the dominant conceptions of gender in society. "Gender is not an inner core or static essence but a reiterated enactment of norms, ones which produce, retroactively, the appearance of gender as an abiding interior depth."[8] She stresses two points that mirror what Laclau and Mouffe are doing in their theorization of hegemonic politics:

> (1) that the term that claims to represent a prior reality produces retroactively that priority as an effect of its own operation and (2) that every determined structure gains its determination by a repetition and hence, a contingency that puts at risk the determined character of that structure. For feminism, that means that gender does not represent an interior depth but produces that interiority and depth performatively as the effect of its own operation. And it means that "patriarchy" or "systems" of masculine domination are not systemic totalities bound to keep women in positions of oppression but, rather, hegemonic forms of power that expose their own frailty in the very operation of their iterability. The strategic task for feminism is to exploit these occasions of frailty as they emerge. (14)

This is difficult writing, certainly, although not excessively so once one understands a few key terms and has in mind some particular illustrations of the processes at stake. My undergraduate students quickly become able to handle it. In fact, despite the high level of abstraction, it is quite pedagogic writing. Key points are rephrased and repeated so that if you don't catch on the first time around, you have another chance when they come by again. Butler has a distinctive style, determined in part by the counterintuitive processes she is describing: there is not a set of given entities that produce certain effects; rather, what we take to be the entities are the performative effects of repetition. Since English leads us to assume that the nouns we use have preexisting referents, sentences wishing to argue that these entities are themselves produced through repetition turn back on themselves in ways that may make them hard to read. Thus: "gender does not represent an interior depth but produces that interiority and depth performatively as the effect of its own operation."

Denis Dutton maintains, "When Kant or Aristotle or Wittgenstein are most obscure, it is because they are honestly grappling with the most complex and difficult problems that the human mind can encounter. How different from the desperate incantations of the Bad Writing Contest Winners, who hope to persuade their readers not by argument but by obscurity that they too are the great minds of the age."[9] I do not find helpful the distinction between honest grappling and the desperate production of obscurity, but Butler is certainly grappling with difficult problems.

Dutton's comment indicates, though, the ease with which—depending on whether or not one sympathizes with the philosophical mode—one can praise difficult writing as a heroic struggle with the antinomies of thought or else condemn it as pretentious vacuousness. There is bad writing everywhere, but public complaints about bad writing in philosophy generally seem complaints about a philosophical mode: a mode of thought one finds uncongenial, concerns of which one doesn't see the pertinence, so that the writing seems pointless and pretentious in its flaunting of specialized language (as I found the Nozick passages).

In the hope of avoiding the issue of sympathy with or antipathy to a philosophical mode, I want to approach the problem of philosophical style and bad writing not through texts outside the analytic tradition but through a very interesting and enigmatic figure, Stanley Cavell. A student of J. L. Austin and admirer of Wittgenstein, Cavell is known for his distinctive writing. What is happening philosophically in Cavell's stylish writing?

The reviews suggest that if we wanted a famous philosopher who could

be charged with bad writing, Cavell would be an obvious choice. The *Times Literary Supplement*'s review of his most famous book, *The Claim of Reason*, by Anthony Kenny (entitled "Clouds of Not Knowing"), speaks of Cavell's "self-indulgent" style, especially his penchant for gratuitous qualifications and parenthetical interruptions, and concludes that despite "Cavell's philosophical and literary gifts, his book is a misshapen, undisciplined amalgam of ill-sorted parts."[10] Mark Glouberman, in the *Review of Metaphysics*, calls his style "inexcusable";[11] Dan Ducker, in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, writes that "the pattern of withholding judgment, of putting off closure, builds certain frustrations in the reader. There are moments in Cavell's book where one wants to scream, 'Good God, come to the point!'"[12] Even admirers have harsh words for his style. At the beginning of *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* Stephen Mulhall notes "a feature of his writing which has become increasingly prominent over time, a feature one might call its 'lack of momentum'—a sense that there is no necessity to continue beyond the end of any given sentence."[13] Richard Fleming, in another book-length study, speaks of "the inertia of the many voices expressed in [Cavell's writing] and its constant self-reflections and pondering about self-knowledge."[14] Fleming continues, "It is certainly true that Cavell's way of writing has kept him outside of mainstream philosophy—if only because it has kept him from being read."[15]

Bad writing? Without more ado, here is the opening sentence of Cavell's most famous book, *The Claim of Reason*:

> If not at the beginning of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, since what starts philosophy is no more to be known at the outset than how to make an end of it; and if not at the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*, since its opening is not to be confused with the starting of the philosophy it expresses, and since the terms in which that opening might be understood can hardly be given along with the opening itself; and if we acknowledge from the commencement, anyway leave open at the opening, that the way this work is written is internal to what it teaches, which means that we cannot understand the matter (call it the method) before we understand its work; and if we do not look to our history, since placing this book historically can hardly happen earlier than placing it philosophically; nor look to Wittgenstein's past, since then we are likely to suppose that the *Investigations* is written in criticism of the *Tractatus*, which is not so much wrong as empty, both because to know what constitutes its criticism would be to know what constitutes its philosophy, and because it is more to the present point to see how the *Investigations* is written in criticism of itself; then where and how are we to approach this text?[16]

And the first paragraph concludes: "How shall we let this book teach us, this or anything?"

Is it necessary to say that this is deliberate? I imagine that an editor at Oxford University Press might even have red-penciled this sentence and been told to let it stand. It would certainly have been easy to make it easier for the reader. For example: "How should we approach Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations?* We could start on page 1, but the terms for understanding the beginning of the text aren't given with the text itself; nor is the beginning of the text the beginning of the philosophy. Moreover, the beginning of the philosophy is not something we can know at the outset." And so on. The difficulty here is the difficulty of beginning philosophy, where there is in principle nothing that can be taken for granted. This is the difficulty Hegel confronts in the preface to the *Phenomenology* (where there are points similar to Cavell's about the ways in which particular contextual approaches mislead). Hegel's confrontation produces a text thought to be hard to read, though not harder, I think, than this sentence of Cavell's, which seeks not to expound the difficulties but to confuse the reader. The two "if not at . . . " clauses presuppose objections, and the "since . . . " clauses may be taken to embody those objections, but since we don't, until after two hundred words have past, get the question "where and how to approach?" to which the supposed answers are being rejected, the reader couldn't understand the sentence until the very end; and by then, the structure of the sentence has been obscured by the shift halfway through from the negative, "if *not* at . . . since" structure (which would have been comprehensible), to the positive "if we acknowledge at the opening, anyway leave open . . . that," which doesn't talk about a *place* to start or not start and thus leaves readers more at sea. If good writing is that which considers the reader and gives him or her what is needed to follow, this is bad writing, especially since no virtues of elegance or aphoristic elan compensate for the befuddlement generated.

Richard Fleming, who wrote an entire book about Cavell's book, claims that the first sentence shows "the care and high respect that he has for the reader. He writes to someone who has been and continues to be engaged at a sophisticated level by Wittgenstein's struggle with the state of philosophy."[17] I think that is wrong. The sentence isn't any clearer to a sophisticated Wittgenstinean. The explanation lies in a different direction—one indicated by the epigraph to *The Claim of Reason*, from Emerson: "Truly speaking, it is not instruction but provocation that I can receive from another soul." The opening sentence provokes—and thus can, arguably, serve its function of alerting us to the fact that philosophy as Cavell conceives it is not something systematic or even expoundable. The sentence can work this way even if it also makes reviewers write that his style is inexcusable: it makes readers experience what it might *be* for nothing to be given and thus, in a minor way, to live the impossibility of deciding what comes first and how to go about thinking. "A philosophical question has the form: 'I don't know my way about,'" writes Wittgenstein.[18] I imagine this aphorism lurks somewhere in the murk from which Cavell's monstrous sentence arises.

Cavell continues, "I will say first, by way of introducing myself and saying why I insist, as I will throughout the following pages, upon the *Investigations* as a philosophical text, that I have wished to understand philosophy not as a set of problems but as a set of texts" (3). Not "I understand philosophy," but "I have wished to understand." This is the sort of thing that prompts one to call his writing precious or self-indulgent. But that is an interesting charge: "self-indulgent." What does that mean? How is the self being indulged? By contrast with the epistemic standpoint of "I understand . . . " or the impersonality of "Philosophy is better understood as a collection of texts," "I *have wished* to understand" evokes a self with desires and a history. But Cavell's writing is rarely autobiographical, and here, when he might easily take the opportunity to introduce the self, with some substantial remarks about its past and its experiences, we get instead the slim reference to a wished-for understanding of philosophy.[19] He does not seek to explain his views by evoking a past history. "I have wished to understand" marks the fact that an understanding, perhaps especially in philosophy, is not something that can be treated as unproblematically given but consists of inclinations, temptations, possibilities that have been attempted, ways of proceeding. To understand philosophy as a set of texts would be—what?—to try to write in ways that treated philosophy as different practices of writing (not easy to do).

But Cavell makes life hard for those who would justify his style: after this sentence he immediately asks whether this remark about texts is itself to be understood as a text, produces a two-page excursus on the different sorts or lengths of texts, and then continues: "But I was supposed to be saying more, having said something first, by way of introducing myself, and concerning how we should approach Wittgenstein's text. Accordingly, I will say, second, that there is no approach to it, anyway I have none" (6).

This is writing that, first and foremost, calls attention to itself as writing. These sentences do that, with a coyness one can certainly find irritating—as in the gratuitous "second" here. Is this not coyness more than self-scrutiny, or, at best, parody of the idea of steps or method?[20] Why would philosophy call attention to itself as writing? Philosophy is writing not only because that is the form in which we generally encounter it but, most important, because the fundamental philosophical question, for Cavell, is how we understand each other and ourselves. Philosophy and philosophical writing need to seek, and to question in seeking, that understanding. Thus, philosophy cannot be a matter of attempted proofs and well-wrought arguments but of working to find common ground through words that others will feel carry weight, that capture what has remained elusive.

> If you give up something like formal argument as a route to conviction in philosophy, and you give up the idea that either scientific persuasion or poetic persuasion is the way to philosophical conviction, then the question of what achieves philosophical conviction must at all times be on your mind. The obvious answer to me is that it must lie in the writing itself. But in *what* about the writing? It isn't that there's a rhetorical form, any more than there is an emotional form, in which I expect conviction to happen. But the sense that nothing other than this prose just here, as it's passing before our eyes, can carry conviction, is one of the thoughts that drives the shape of what I do.[21]

Cavell does not answer the question of what in writing might carry conviction. Obviously, there is no recipe for it. But what is involved here? How is what Cavell does—write philosophy—shaped by the need to write so as to give conviction a chance to happen? And since Wittgenstein's is the philosophical writing with which he is most concerned, how is Wittgenstein's writing shaped by this end?

The Claim of Reason is a book focused on the *Philosophical Investigations*, which Cavell thinks has been approached wrongly, as if, for instance, it contained a philosophy of language to be teased out. "Wittgenstein has no philosophy of language at all," he writes. Wittgenstein is interested in matters of language because "they are topics in which the soul interests and manifests itself, so the soul's investigation of itself, in person or in others, will have to investigate these topics and those interests as and where they ordinarily manifest themselves" (15). Cavell spends a lot of time on the question of the nature of criteria, where his two philosophical mentors and models, J. L. Austin and Wittgenstein, are at odds. The appeal to what we say and the search for criteria "are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis on which it can or has been established" (20). Appeals to criteria expose the fragile agreements on which our relations with others are based. In the exploration of how such appeals are conducted and of their entanglement with the stream of life, Cavell's Wittgenstein is not seeking to refute skepticism but to explore the problem of the other, of other minds, which philosophy has been too inclined to treat as a special problem, whereas in fact it is central to most aspects of life, including doing philosophy, which is writing that must find ways to engage the other.

When he began to study the *Investigations*, Cavell writes, he was struck by the play of skeptical voices and answering voices. "I knew reasonably soon thereafter and reasonably well that my fascination with the *Investigations* had to do with my response to it as a feat of writing. It was some years before I understood it as what I came to think of as the discovery for philosophy of the problem of the other; and further years before these issues looked to me like functions of one another" (xiii). Here again we have that spare form of self-indulgence, a style shaped by the reference to the temporality of a self but where the content is not other than philosophical—that is, Cavell is not trying to ground, justify, or explain a philosophical position by reference to

some other sort of life experience. This might better be seen as confession—impersonal confession: recounting your thoughts in a way that invites readers to consider the possibility of trying out the relation that is narrated. This is different from writing "I intend to show that the text as a feat of writing is a version of the problem of the other." Is the implication that there is no other way to show this than to invite the reader to repeat the passage from one to the other?

Wittgenstein and Cavell write stylish philosophy but in very different ways. Wittgenstein is accused of being maddeningly enigmatic or unforthcoming but not, I think, of writing badly. He is spare, aphoristic, enigmatic, paratactic. Cavell is orotund, expansive, digressive, fussy, hypotactic. But since Cavell regards the *Investigations* as, more than any other text, "paradigmatic of philosophy for me" (xv) and has sought to discover "ways of writing I could regard as philosophical and could recognize as sometimes extensions—hence sometimes denials—of Wittgenstein's" (xv), one might ask whether there are things that Cavell's and Wittgenstein's ways of writing share. What does Cavell point us to in Wittgenstein's writing?

Neither claims to advance philosophical theses, for instance. I quoted earlier a passage suggesting that Cavell had no pretension to formal argument or poetic persuasion. He says, even more strikingly, about Wittgenstein's writing,

> There is exhortation ("Do not say: 'there *must* be something common' . . . but *look* and *see* . . . ") not to belief but to self-scrutiny. And that is why there is virtually nothing in the *Investigations* which we should ordinarily call reasoning; Wittgenstein asserts nothing which could be proved, for what he asserts is either obvious—whether true or false—or else concerned with what conviction, whether by proof or evidence or authority, would consist in. Otherwise there are questions, jokes, parables, and propositions so striking that they stun mere belief. (Are we asked to believe that "if a lion could talk we could not understand him"?) Belief is not enough. Either the suggestion penetrates past assessment and becomes part of the sensibility from which assessment proceeds, or it is philosophically useless.[22]

This strikes me as a very significant and acute passage. It is also, of course, a very strong contention: that what does not penetrate past assessment is philosophically useless. That sets high standards for philosophical utility. The goal of penetrating past assessment to become part of the sensibility from which assessment proceeds is a daunting one, a real challenge for philosophical style. But it is clear also that skillful writing is what it calls for: writing that appeals to the other not to persuade but to find an echo and ultimately to receive acknowledgment.

Wittgenstein's writing works out methods for attaining self-knowledge that aspires also to be knowledge of others: posing questions where readers must try out their responses to an imagined situation, seeing what might be

said and meant. He makes very heavy use of questions, for example (as does Judith Butler, I might mention); and he goes to much trouble, Cavell writes, "to give them a rhetorical air," as in "What gives the impression that we want to deny anything?" which certainly seems to suggest that he is not denying anything.[23] "He wants to leave that way of taking them open to us, to make it hard to see that they needn't be taken rhetorically, that instead the question is one he is genuinely asking, asking himself, and asking us to ask ourselves. The implication of this literary procedure here is that it is difficult to see that such a question genuinely needs asking, difficult to ask it genuinely" (103). This claim—about the function of making something difficult so that the reader may need aggressively to make an effort to ask a question seriously—may provide clues to some of Cavell's own writing decisions.

Cavell sees the *Investigations* as engaging in the mode of the confession: not because it offers personal information but because in confessing what you would or would not say, what you are tempted to say or resist saying, "you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested, and accepted or rejected."[24] The *Investigations* is convincing because its questions and suppositions play out a desire, a willingness to resist the temptations of habitual misunderstandings. Wittgenstein's talk of what "we say" or wouldn't say adduces his linguistics intuitions, his sense of our ways of talking and thinking. "And the fact is," Cavell writes, "so much of what he shows to be true of his consciousness is true of ours (of mine). This is perhaps the fact of his writing to be most impressed by; it may be the fact that he is most impressed by—that it can be done at all" (20). Elsewhere Cavell notes that "skepticism about our knowledge of others is frequently accompanied by complacency about our knowledge of ourselves" but that those who historically have been capable of the deepest personal confession (such as Augustine, Rousseau, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, and Freud) have been those "most convinced that they were speaking from the most hidden knowledge of others" (109). In such cases, of course, the universal bearing of the confession is inextricable from the skill of writers. To write convincingly about the self is to write about others as well.

In Cavell and Wittgenstein the attempt to make suggestions that may have a chance to penetrate past assessment also generates language that attempts to get attention, to stop you, even to make itself memorable, as are Wittgenstein's famous aphorisms: "Why can't a dog tell a lie? Is it because he is too honest?" But Cavell does not attempt aphorism. He is concerned to spell out, inviting participation and recognition, once he has secured attention; his mode is capacious, exfoliating, running to parentheses and qualification. The larger part of *The Claim of Reason* engages in very laborious examination of Wittgenstinian problems, with Cavell imagining questions and

questioners, offering discriminations about precisely what concerns him here and what does not, reflecting on the meaning of the various terms we might or might not offer in connection with such dialogues. This is prose that flows on continuously, with passages that go on and on—at the opposite remove, it might seem, from the paratactic paragraphs of the *Investigations*. Yet, in the end, in one way the effect is surprisingly similar. Just as you can't read Wittgenstein straight through but must stop and become involved in the little dramas of questioning and self-questioning his fragments stage, so with Cavell, I find, you can't read straight through to find out what he is saying but have to break the text into short chunks (four or five pages at a time is my limit) and allow yourself to get engaged in puzzling over these matters. You must forget or at least set aside the fact that there are over five hundred pages to this book and read as if it were a series of short scenarios.

Cavell does not, to my knowledge, talk about what might count as bad style in philosophy, but he is critical of philosophy's habit of proceeding by charging other philosophers with mistakes, nonsense, blindness, contradiction, circularity, what have you. Nozick, for instance, reports in *Philosophical Explanation* that he "usually reads works of philosophy with all defenses up, with a view to finding out where the author has gone wrong."[25] This leads to the situation Cavell regrets, where any graduate student can rehearse "how Descartes was mistaken about dreams, or Locke about truth or Berkeley about God or Kant about things in themselves or moral worth, or Hegel about logic, and so forth."[26] But what if philosophers, following Austin's analysis of what is involved in doing something by accident or by mistake (his analysis and not his own conduct in charging other philosophers with mistakes), were to "grant to other philosophers the ordinary rights of language and vision that Austin grants all other men: to ask them, in his spirit, why they should say what they say where and when they say it, and to give the full story before claiming satisfaction."[27] Then just as ordinary-language philosophy ties understanding to the elucidation of underlying consistencies or acknowledgment of commonality, so philosophy might become less of an esoteric battle and more of an enterprise of understanding. Cavell recommends, at least, that philosophy treat criticisms it feels "phenomenologically, as temptations or feelings; in a word, as data, not as answers."[28] In sum, the goal should be not to find mistakes in other philosophers but to understand from within, in the hope of reaching if not understanding and agreement, recognition and acknowledgment.

In something of this spirit, in a fine essay, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," Cavell takes up an issue in philosophy where it is hard to imagine reconciliation. Kant distinguishes the judgment that something is pleasant (canary wine is pleasant—which means "pleasant to me") from the judgment that an aesthetic object is beautiful (it would be "laughable," he says, to

justify oneself by saying it is "beautiful to me"). The later judgment demands or claims or imputes general validity. There is thus supposed to be a difference of kind in the judgments involved. "One hardly knows," writes Cavell, "whether to call this a metaphysical or a logical difference. Kant called it a transcendental difference; Wittgenstein would call it a grammatical difference. But how can psychological differences like finding something laughable or foolish (which perhaps not *every* person would) be thought to betray such potent, or anyway different, differences?"[29] Cavell continues:

> Here we hit upon what is to my mind the most sensitive index of misunderstanding and bitterness between the positivist and the post-positivist components of analytical philosophy: the positivist grits his teeth when he hears an analysis given out as the logical one which is so painfully remote from formality, so obviously a question of how you happen to feel at the moment, so "psychological"; the philosopher who proceeds from everyday language stares back helplessly, asking, "Don't you feel the difference? Listen, you *must* see it?" Surely, both know what the other knows, and each thinks the other is perverse, or irrelevant, or worse. (90)

Cavell sets out to describe why philosophers like him want to call such differences logical, in responding to the element of necessity felt in them, together with a sense of the ways such judgments are supported and conviction produced—by recurrent patterns of support. And he goes on to argue that Kant's aesthetic judgments, with their "universal" character that does not depend on empirical evidence about assent, are similar to philosophers' claims about "what we say." If you disagree, you don't try to collect data but try to determine why, and if you can't explain the disagreement, you try to find an explanation for that, with different examples.

"The philosopher appealing to everyday language," he writes, "turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say. . . . All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is express, as fully as he can, his world and attract our undivided attention to our own."[30]

The reader may well be put off or preoccupied with other things, but language that gets one's attention may also, unpredictably, give conviction a chance to happen. Or rather—since Cavell says that unless suggestion penetrates past assessment, it is philosophically useless—we might speak of the reader "getting the hang of it":[31] coming to participate in a way of thinking that feels right, as something he or she can now do.

It is to give this unpredictable possibility a chance that Cavell writes this stylish, mannered prose designed to capture attention. If it aspires to provocation rather than instruction, it nevertheless instructs, if you take it in small enough chunks that its *longueurs* become occasions for reflection—leading

you to see something for yourself—rather than irritation. It can be remarkable philosophy, even though its parts, such as the opening sentence of *The Claim of Reason*, could win any bad writing contest.

Notes

1. Denis Dutton, "Language Crimes," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 5, 1999, W11. See also Denis Dutton, "Bad Writing Contest: Results for Round Three," posted at www.miami.edu/phi/misc/badwrit3.htm.
2. I understand that the contest has now been abandoned, perhaps because Dutton realized that this was not a good basis for judgment.
3. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 101.
4. Ibid., 1.
5. Judith Butler, "Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time," *Diacritics* 27, no. 1 (spring 1997): 13.
6. Dutton, "Language Crimes," 11.
7. Butler, "Further Reflections," 13.
8. Ibid., 14.
9. Dutton, "Language Crimes," 11.
10. Anthony Kenny, "Clouds of Not Knowing," review of *The Claim of Reason*, by Stanley Cavell, *Times Literary Supplement*, April 18, 1980, 449.
11. M. Glouberman, review of *The Claim of Reason*, by Stanley Cavell, *Review of Metaphysics* 32 (June 1979): 913.
12. Dan Ducker, review of *The Claim of Reason*, by Stanley Cavell, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 21 (March 1981): 109–11.
13. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), xii.
14. Richard Fleming, *The State of Philosophy: An Invitation to a Reading in Three Parts of Stanley Cavell's "The Claim of Reason"* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1993), 10.
15. Ibid., 11. One should note that *The Claim of Reason* is in its seventh printing, but possibly many purchasers quickly stop reading.
16. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3. Further references to this work will be given by page numbers in the text.
17. Fleming, *State of Philosophy*, 22.
18. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, no. 123, 3d ed., trans. G. E. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 49.
19. Elsewhere Cavell does, I admit, seem to spend more time than other philosophers telling you about the genealogy of his writings—how what you are reading relates to his past writings—and this can certainly seem a form of self-indulgence designed to focus attention on the career and corpus of this self, but I think that what we are dealing with in this passage is different.
20. Cavell says, "If I could set every word down and question the very setting of that word down as I set it down, I would do that to the point of self-excruciation." James Conant, "Interview with Stanley Cavell," in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 59. His critics would say this self-excruciation is excruciating to readers.
21. Conant, "Interview," 59.
22. Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, by Stanley Cavell (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 71.
23. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, no. 305, p. 102.
24. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 71.
25. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanation*, 6.
26. Cavell, "Austin at Criticism," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* 111.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 110.
29. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* 90.
30. Ibid., 96.
31. See "Austin at Criticism," 103.