



**MICHAŁ FILIPCZUK**



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6617-8256>

Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie, Szkoła Doktorska

ul. Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Kraków

e-mail: michalef@poczta.fm

## Autobiographicity and Subjectivity in Stanley Cavell's Thought

### Abstract

In this paper, my aim is to provide a brief characterisation of selected features of the Cavellian understanding of philosophy, especially in view of the role played by autobiographical aspects in Cavell's philosophical and literary reflections. Autobiography would appear to be one of Cavell's favourite sources of cognition, at the same time serving as an important medium for his self-promotion. The self-reflection which may be achieved thanks to autobiography is never purely passive; on the contrary, it entails an inherent element of introspection of one's subjectivity. This creative dimension offers Cavell the opportunity to embark on his reading of Emersonian perfectionism, which he understood as a never-ending upward movement, an unstoppable advance towards self-perfection. At the same time, it reveals the irreducible complexity and pervasiveness of the autobiographical aspects in Cavell's thought in their interconnections with other aspects of his thought, such as, for example, his unique approach to psychoanalysis (especially in therapeutic contexts), or to aesthetic experience. As a result, Cavell's work in philosophy turns into a deeply personal experience which defies complete translation into discursive language.

Stanley Cavell; autobiography; psychoanalysis; philosophy as a therapy; aesthetics; Emersonian perfectionism

### Funding Acknowledgements

This research was funded in whole or in part by the National Science Centre, Poland [Project number: 2021/41/N/HS1/03172]. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.

## 1. Initial remarks

In this paper, I will outline several characteristic features which mark the individuality of Stanley Cavell's literary and philosophical output (Filipczuk 2018: 25–36). Various aspects of Cavell's thought intertwine seamlessly, constituting something of an internally consistent universe not lacking in strictly personal themes, which makes his ideas particularly difficult to unravel for those who endeavour to interpret them. The personal themes in Cavell's ideas further complicate the issue of philosophical identity as he defines it, which significantly differs from the traditional understanding of it. Undertaking a comprehensive discussion of any of these themes or aspects in isolation is therefore an impossible endeavour. Nonetheless, I shall attempt to examine a number of Cavell's main characteristics.

One of Cavell's key characteristics, perhaps the principal one, is his tendency to wander into autobiographicity in the broadest sense of the term.<sup>1</sup> His autobiographicity may be read as a specific kind of narrative, but one which has not been given a fully comprehensive definition in literary typologies and which has a vague scope. Cavell's autobiographic quality is important, mainly due to the cognitive values inherent in it, which give an insight into his mind, his personal story, and his views.

Cavell's autobiographicity plays a significant role in his ideas from a methodological perspective, too, which makes it an essential component of the way he sees philosophy, understanding it as a form of indispensable reflection for self-observation and self-knowledge. According to Cavell, this is the true purpose of all philosophising, which is a clear reference to the Socratic philosophical tradition (Cavell 1994: 4). However, since his ideas overlap and intertwine to such an extent, any generalisations will inevitably involve simplification and will therefore be doomed to fail. Moreover, due to Cavell's idiosyncratic mode of thinking, which is far from consistent and eludes rigid definition, from

---

<sup>1</sup> As Jean Paul Sartre aptly observes, "A man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories [...] he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories in that he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it" (Sartre 1964). In this paper autobiography/autobiographicity is understood in the broad sense of the term, i.e. as a particular form of writing based on one's life experience, especially from a cognitive perspective.

the outset, it is imperative to acknowledge that my list of themes or characteristic features of Cavell's concept of philosophical identity (with the exception, perhaps, of his autobiographicity) is by no means complete.

My point of departure is one of Cavell's perspectives on philosophical identity understood within the framework of therapy, not in Wittgenstein's terms, which have been thoroughly described,<sup>2</sup> but against the backdrop of Freudian psychoanalysis,<sup>3</sup> in particular the version espoused by James Hillman, an interpreter and exponent of the psychoanalytical approach.

One of the characteristics of therapeuticity understood in Hillman's sense is the importance of valuing the subjective point of view as a fully-fledged source of self-understanding, which leads directly to the appreciation of a specific narrative form. It is in this way that autobiography grows out of Cavell's thoughts. One curious aspect is the method of autophilosophy, as some commentators have termed it (La Rocca 2019), which for Cavell's reader, conjures up associations with the essay — a reasonable conjecture, as I will expound upon below.

Autobiographicity also has a purely aesthetic dimension, although it is not devoid of certain cognitive functions that play a role in the formation of subjectivity. Experiencing a work of art is indeed a salient stage in shaping the subjective self and helps an individual to transcend his subjectivity within a wider community dimension, of which his emergent subjectivity constitutes an integral part.

Thus, the individual's autobiographical subjectivity is transcended to become rooted within a wider communal context. In this sense, the aesthetic dimension not only assumes a status owing to the role it plays in the formation of the individual's subjectivity and its objectification, thanks to his aesthetic judgments, but it also acquires a new, purely ethical dimension, which refers the reader to another important source of inspiration, namely Emerson's philosophy as interpreted by Cavell. However, I shall not be elaborating on this theme here, but merely note its existence, as it calls for a separate study.

## 2. Philosophy, psychoanalysis and autobiography

Cavell places Sigmund Freud in the mainstream of the European philosophical tradition against the backdrop of the tradition of German idealism in the broad sense of the term. He perceives a conceptual parallel between Freud's ideas and Kant's philosophy. In his commentary on this view of Freud, Cavell observes that since the Freudian *Id* is as inaccessible to cognition as Kant's *Ding an sich* ("thing-in-itself"), which is merely a theoretical postulate, one may treat Freud's construct in the same way. Freud's *Id* is analogous to Kant's conceptual construct, also by virtue of the fact that, like Kant's *Ding an sich*, Freud's *Id* is (or is supposed to be) unconditional, not subject to any influences, something which is itself the source of all influence (see Cavell 1987: 386–393).

Cavell's attention to psychoanalysis in the broad sense of the concept, with its characteristic focus on therapy, appears to be indisputable and manifests itself in one of the

<sup>2</sup> This is not surprising given that Cavell is still regarded as one of the most important interpreters of Wittgenstein, whose notion of "philosophy as therapy" is one of the central tenets of his philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein's concept of philosophy was particularly close to Cavell's. For the interrelationships of these two senses of "therapy", which these two authors understood in an entirely different manner, see Bremer 2021.

structural features of his philosophy, namely his “redemptive reading”.<sup>4</sup> So it can be asserted that this is a clear sign of Freud’s influence in Cavell’s work, and that the analytical method he adopts for literary interpretation includes aspects directly borrowed from classical psychoanalysis. However, in Cavell’s work, terms like “projection,” “transposition,” “fixation,” “mourning,” etc. do not appear in the context of the patient-psychoanalyst relationship, as they do in the writings of Freud; instead, they are associated with the reader-text dynamic. For Cavell, it is the text itself that performs the therapeutic function. He states that like the patient, the reader is “being read” by the text<sup>5</sup>. This reader-text paradox has been fully described in the context of Cavell’s analytical method treated as a specific therapy through the act of reading (cf. Mulhall 2011: 214–218; see also Filipczuk 2008; cf. Rudrum 1974: 34–35). Therefore, the statement that Cavell also offers a specific therapy would appear to be correct.<sup>6</sup>

However, even more importantly, according to Cavell, the common denominator shared by philosophy and psychoanalysis appears to be the paradoxical relationship that links them both with a specific narrative form, namely autobiographicality. This paradoxical relationship may be said to consist of a reluctance to autobiographicality formally manifested by both disciplines, yet at the same time, in Cavell’s opinion, autobiographicality remains indispensable for both psychoanalysis and philosophy.

Cavell observes that for representatives of the typically academic branches of philosophy, an autobiographical identity turns out to be something too personal (Cavell 1994: 4 et seq.). For representatives of conventional psychoanalysis, such an identity is also too personal, but in an unacceptable sense. Perhaps the obstacle he diagnoses consists in the fact that autobiography is written from the perspective of the ego, which mystifies and obscures the narrative — albeit here Cavell resorts to equivocation, in his characteristic manner (Cavell 1994: 4 et seq.) — or rather the literary equivalent or image of “one’s story”, subject to various cultural pressures and mired in specific conventions, including writer-related ones, imposed by the form itself, with autobiography understood as a literary genre (cf. Cavell 1988: 3–27).

<sup>4</sup> It would appear that William Day offers the best characterisation of this term: “[in Cavell’s work] reading is to be understood redemptively, which one can construe to mean ‘therapeutically’ or ‘psychoanalytically’, as the reader’s being read by the text. The philosophical text so conceived is meant to free us not only from our dogmatic beliefs [...] but also from our unthinking ways of taking in what we read” (see Day 2011: 77). Cf. Cavell’s statement in a slightly different context: “What I am producing here [...] might be thought of as a theology of reading” (Cavell 1988: 53). The act of reading plays crucial role also in Hans-Georg Gadamer hermeneutics, in many respects similar to Cavellian conception of „redemptive reading”. As David Liakos aptly observes, for both Cavell and Gadamer, “the text expresses who she [the reader] is, perhaps in a way she had not seen before but which she now recognizes as true. By encountering the text, the reader encounters herself [...] The text is not directly about her, yet she finds that it precisely expresses something about her experience [...]” And when this happens “I come to know myself in a way I did not before [...] In reading one begins to understand who one really is. For Cavell and for Gadamer this recognition means acquiring bona fide self-knowledge” (Liakos 2019: 81–83).

<sup>5</sup> “To read a text in this way — under the phantasy of the text analyzing me — is to find ways in which it shows me how to find myself beyond it, which is to say beyond myself as its reader” (Cavell 1996: 113; see also Cavell 1988: 16–17).

<sup>6</sup> According to Stephen Mulhall, we may expect the aim both of Freud’s and Cavell’s works to be “the recovery of self, community and world through acknowledgment of and by another self...” (see Mulhall 2011: 186).

However, there is a salient approach to psychoanalysis which does not reject a certain type of autobiographical narrative. In this approach, psychoanalysis can be treated as a tool to create a type of fiction on a par with literary fiction. The fiction created in this case serves a self-therapeutic function. Even though Cavell does not consider this type of psychoanalysis directly, to a certain extent, his own ideas do appear to align with this approach in matters discussed by its main advocate, James Hillman (see Hillman 1983: 3–4).

According to Hillman: “Psychoanalysis is a work of imaginative tellings in the realm of *poiesis* [...] which I take to mean making by imagination into words”. Given this assumption, Hillman postulates:

[...] a psychology of the soul that is also a psychology of the imagination, one which takes its point of departure neither in the physiology of the brain, nor in structural linguistics or behavior analysis, but in the processes of the imagination. That is: a psychology that assumes a poetic basis of the mind. (Hillman 1983: 10–11)

Once this assumption has been made, medical “scientific jargon” is no longer the only legitimate or privileged form of discourse, nor does it provide a basis for a descriptive language that, in cognitive terms, is distinctive from alternative linguistic frameworks. Instead, it turns into a “disguise” for poetical fiction and is applied to make this poetical fiction more scientific and validate it (Hillman 1983: 12 et seq.). Viewed from this perspective, Freud emerges as a scientific writer whose stylistic features are reminiscent of the formal stylistic features characteristic for authors of “Victorian novels” (according to Hillman). Consequently, as Hillman says,

[...] in his [Freud's] subsequent work [we come upon] [...] these Victorian, these detective-story-style, appeals to the reader, reminding him of what was said some pages back, or cautioning him that a point is worth holding in mind for it will appear again later. (Hillman 1983: 11)

Hence, as Hillman concludes in his fictitious interview with Freud,<sup>7</sup> in his work we have a concept described using scientific jargon that is situated at the formal interface of the impact of “the three greatest literary schools of the nineteenth century: Heine, Zola, and Mallarmé [...] united in me under the patronage of the old master, Goethe” (Hillman 1983: 3).

Hillman's notion of psychoanalysis is perfectly aligned with the supremacy of voice in philosophy which is crucial for Cavell's thought, that is, the supremacy of what is personal and individual (cf. Gould 1998: 54–55). If we adopt this approach, subjectivity will become a fully-fledged, fully authorized form of cognition both for the speaker and his audience. Importantly, the psychoanalyst-patient relationship allows the speaker to utter reflections and observations that he has not fully fathomed, of whose meaning he is not fully aware until he has uttered them. According to Cavell, this is evidence for the driving

<sup>7</sup> This apocryphal interview comes from “An interview of Professor Freud”, a 1934 text by Papini, a passage from which is cited in Hillman 1983: 3.

force and effectiveness of the method<sup>8</sup> that allows the person subject to psychoanalysis to present his self-referential narratives,<sup>9</sup> which, as Hillman says, “I can hold to be ‘mine.’ At the same time, I also fear these stories because through them I can be found out, my imaginary foundations exposed.” Consequently, “repression is built into each story as the fear of the story itself” (Hillman 1983: 51).

Therefore, in Hillman’s view:

Psychotherapy first set out to heal memory [...]. The first step in that treatment occurred when Freud cured memory of its notion of itself as history — Mnemosyne’s identification with one particular daughter, Clio. The second step cures memory of its fixation on its remembrances by recognizing them as images. [...] As we muse over a memory, it becomes an image, shedding its literal historical facticity, slipping its causal chains, and opening into the stuff of which art is made. The art of healing is healing into art. (Hillman 1983: 51–52)

In other words, we may conclude that the deepest foundation of an individual’s being is intrinsically linked with his imagination. This notion is in perfect harmony with the appreciation of autobiographical narrative which Cavell presents when he writes:

I was unprepared to claim that the interest in the new philosophy lay precisely in the necessity and openness of its arrogance and its autobiographicality, that these are not personal but structural features of the necessity to say what we say, that in thus laying their bodies on the philosophical line, and living to tell their tale, the likes of Wittgenstein and Austin must be tapping a dimension of philosophy as such. (Cavell 1994: 10).

As he ironically observes later in the same text, it would seem that philosophy has every reason to refrain from autobiographicality and aspire to talk in a manner that is necessary and universally applicable.<sup>10</sup> This point of view has been validated by historical tradition within institutionalized philosophy. However, the same philosophers, speaking on behalf of objective truths, on other occasions leave us with a sequence of images showing themselves immersed in their daily routine, thereby preparing the reader to reconcile himself to the unavoidable dimension of autobiographicality. This, in turn, leads to the observation that this dimension is not only anecdotal but also, and perhaps primarily, philosophical; and, contrary to the declarations made by these authors, perhaps it will let their readers penetrate deeper into, and grasp their thoughts more fully (see Cavell 1994: 3).

This seems to be the case with Cavell. From the fairly abstract reflections in his doctoral dissertation later transformed into *The Claim of Reason*, the book which is the basis

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Cavell’s remark in *Disowning Knowledge*, where he says in a different context, “Shakespeare’s dramas, like Freud’s, thus propose our coming to know what we cannot just not know; like philosophy” (cited in Fischer 1989: 1153). The Socratic outline of such philosophising would be expressed to the fullest in the above context.

<sup>9</sup> For the role of narrative in the process of shaping the identity of individuals and entire groups, see Hayden White, especially *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory, 1957–2007* (White 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Slightly earlier, Cavell observes: “Philosophers who shun the autobiographical must find another route to philosophical authority [...] (‘logic,’ as Kant says, ‘is such a route’)” (Cavell 1994: 8).

for the further development of his ideas, in his subsequent work Cavell appears to adopt a more and more distinctive manner of philosophising in a rather personal tone. For instance, he often uses autobiographical themes as part of his methodology, blending them in with even the most abstract deliberations. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Cavell's last publication is an intellectual autobiography full of recollections, childhood memories, and self-referential comments. It is composed in a capriciously Socratic spirit, as if it were trying to say that not only the outside world but also the life of the author himself, replete with his own attempts at self-exploration, endeavours to obtain self-knowledge and is ultimately unfathomable in cognitive terms. Nor can it be a coincidence that Cavell titled his last book *Little Did I Know*.<sup>11</sup> So we may venture to say that Cavell is one of the few philosophers who not only make use of autobiographicity but also frequently consider it in their philosophical reflections, not for the sake of publicity but because they treat it as a perfectly legitimate way to engage in philosophical thought, as we may observe throughout Cavell's work.

The unique nature of the human being and its exceptionality are paradoxical: all of us share in it, and at the same time it makes us capable of empathy, able to partake of this exceptionality on the basis of our capacity to perceive, and thanks to the power of our imagination thereby to participate (albeit only in our imagination) in situations directly experienced by others. In short, thanks to autobiography, we are able to empathise with the fate of other human beings (cf. La Rocca 2019: 286; cf. also Moi 2019: 269–275). All this makes autobiographicity quite a useful cognitive instrument, to say the least.

As Toril Moi appositely observes:

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. (Moi 2019: 272; cf. Cavell 1994: vii.)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In this way, to a certain extent, Cavell questions autobiography as a genre, saying it is a highly problematic venture: one that remains a mystery to the very end, even to himself. This conclusion may be regarded as another Socratic imprint in Cavell's thoughts.

<sup>12</sup> In *Little Did I Know*, Cavell characteristically combines his two key sources of philosophical inspiration: Wittgenstein, whose *Investigations* he calls an intellectual autobiography or a condensed autobiographical summary imminent for Wittgenstein's way of thinking; and Austin. Then he makes the following observation: "I might say that I am halfway there already, since Wittgenstein, more to my mind than any other philosopher of the century just past, has shown that, or shown how it happens that, a certain strain of philosophy inescapably takes on autobiography, or perhaps I should say an abstraction of autobiography, and this is how I have understood Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and J.L. Austin's procedures, in their appeals to the language of everyday, or ordinary language, namely, that I speak philosophically for others when they recognize what I say as what they would say, recognize that their language is mine, or put otherwise, that language is ours, that we are speakers. Here is why Wittgenstein emphasizes — something habitually thought false on the face of it — that he does not advance theses in philosophy. What he says is obvious (come to think about it) or it is useless ... the philosopher entrusts himself or herself to write, however limitedly, the autobiography of a species [...]" (Cavell 2010; cf. Cavell 1979b: 168–191). Therefore, Garry Hagberg is right when he writes that, "Philosophical thinking is, for Cavell, in one distinct aspect, autobiographical; and although it may not follow necessarily, nevertheless it would not be surprising to find plausibility in the claim that autobiography is, in one distinct aspect, philosophical in turn" (Hagberg 2008: 65 et seq.).

The practice of “speaking for the human”, for a particular exemplary character whose individual voice may be heard as the voice of Everyman, an ordinary yet simultaneously exceptional and unique being, gives rise to the question of the representativeness of that voice. As one of Cavell’s commentators observes, this is closely connected with the methodological dimension of his considerations. Cavell never grants cognitive priority to the isolated “I”, even though alienated subjectivity is one of his key issues. In his autobiography, Cavell depicts his lonely childhood, alienated from the world of his peers. Nonetheless, he scrutinises the relationship between “I” and “We” in the context of the philosopher’s pursuit of objectivity posited on the grounds of a critical analysis of how representative his own particular judgments are. This brings us to the next point.

### 3. Autobiography and aestheticity: the objectivity of aesthetic judgements. The role of the community context

A particular form of the objectivising transition from “I” to “We” in view of autobiographicity is embedded in the issue of the objectivity or validity of aesthetical judgements, as observed by Jochen Schuff when he discusses this theme in Cavell’s thoughts in association with his film philosophy in *The World Viewed*. Schuff considers this question in the context of the individual’s personal aesthetic experience, which infuses autobiographicity with the specific imprint of his intimate experience of art (Schuff 2020: 151). Cavell recalls his initial experience of this as follows:

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* [...] and a hundred others — were hours and days of awe; momentous, but only for the moment; unrecapturable fully except in memory and evocation. If you see them now for the first time, you may be interested and moved, but you can’t know what I know. (Cavell 1979c: 10)<sup>13</sup>

In *Pursuit of Happiness*, Cavell gives a most apposite presentation of the philosophical criticism of a work of art, regarded as a peculiar extension of the conversation formula. His formula defines a kind of framework, binding — or extending — the formula of autobiographicity by the realm of aesthetic experience. He then makes the following observation:

To 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. (Cavell 1979a: 7)

<sup>13</sup> Therefore, as Schuff correctly notes, complementing autobiographicity with a key context which is memory/recollection, “[what especially matters] is no general account of features of works of art, but a reconstruction of the individual importance of individual moments of aesthetic experience. [...] 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 in immediate experience. Second, there is its demand to recapture the reaction it evokes, *to put it in words...* [my italics — M.F.]” (Schuff 2020: 152 et seq.).



In a discussion of this kind that “objectivises” the subject of one’s aesthetic interest and involves the disclosure of one’s own evaluative opinions buttressed by one’s own argumentation, the subjectively experiencing “I” turns into the subject of aesthetic experience. Thus, its judgement is inevitably objectivised: the subjective is replaced by an inter-subjective instance — designated as a collective “we” that functions as the subject of aesthetic judgements and aims for consensus in matters of taste. In this way, the pure subjectivity of aesthetic judgement is substituted by judgement aspiring to be objective — in terms of art criticism and philosophy of art — in the pioneering manner described by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

What seems to be most interesting here is not the process itself, whereby the subject develops the capacity to make reliable aesthetic judgements and deliver such objectively binding aesthetic judgements on works of art,<sup>14</sup> but the *function* it serves in the objectification of aesthetic experience treated as a tool for self-knowledge and reflection on oneself, that is, conscious subjectivity. In other words, the most interesting aspect is the cognitive function of this judgement in the realm of aesthetic experience based on the subject’s *autobiography*, hence the special role of aesthetic experience and its part in the formation of the conscious “I”.<sup>15</sup>

Experiencing art becomes the background for the subject’s attempts to achieve self-knowledge and self-determination in the context of perceiving a work of art. His endeavours go well beyond cultivation of taste and give rise to questions about his relation to a work of art, his attitude to it, and the premises on which he may examine and challenge it. What is particularly important in the process is the fact that for the individual to transcend the realm of his unarticulated, purely subjective aesthetic experience, he needs aesthetic objectification. This is the sole means that makes self-knowledge possible. So the writer has to reveal his own subjectivity in discourse. According to Cavell, this not only emphasises the significance of “the ephemeral moments of his life,” but also the fact that the beginning of all criticism entails forms of experience which may be made public, that is, forms which are acts of communication and therefore have an eminently social character. As a result, they may make a considerable contribution to developing subjectivity, the identity of which is rooted in narratives from the life of a community.

Mulhall gives an apt summary of this point:

<sup>14</sup> In another work, Cavell states that philosophy is, in fact, helpless when it comes to unquestionably proving the accuracy of aesthetic judgements. This is due to the non-existence of indisputably reasonable and, in this sense, common criteria for such an irrefutable judgement in the realm of taste, the claims of which ultimately come down to yet another form of dogmatism: “Kant’s attention to the ‘universal voice’ expressed in aesthetic judgement seems to me, finally, to afford some explanation of that air of dogmatism which claims about what ‘we’ say seem to carry for critics of ordinary language procedures, and which they find repugnant and intolerant. I think that air of dogmatism is indeed present in such claims” (Cavell 1976: 96).

<sup>15</sup> As Schuff correctly points out: “What emerges here as calling for autobiographical methods in aesthetics is the wish to get to the depths of the individual experience vis-à-vis this particular artwork. Without any exaggeration one may therefore say that for Cavell the domain of aesthetics is the underpinning, the very root of his thinking about subjectivity” (Schuff 2020: 154).

In the case of aesthetics, it is the courage and honesty of my attempts to give expression to my own responses which alone will make it possible for my claim to be speaking for others to be the foundation of a genuine community of response; only if I am true to myself in what I say will others find that I am true to them. (Mulhall 2011: 50; cf. Mulhall 2011: 51–54)<sup>16</sup>

Here, it is vital for the individual realm not to come into opposition with the social realm. We should be dealing with two models of perception and assertion which complement each other in a dialectic interaction, and as a result of this interaction, both of them are enriched and extended (cf. Mulhall 2011: 50–51).

Self-knowledge is possible only on the basis of objectivity and also because we will start to look at ourselves just as we observe others only if we internalise what is external. Attaining to that which is public and inter-subjective is an indispensable condition for the achievement of the subjective: cognition and objectification are possible only when we start to perceive ourselves as if from the outside, as one of many possible subjects. Thus, the myth of privileged access to one's own subjectivity, typical in traditional philosophy, must be rejected.<sup>17</sup> Cavell's perspective aligns with Wittgenstein's negation of privacy as the factor giving privileged access to one's own inner realm (Hagberg 2008: 65). So the subject's inner realm turns out to be yet another social construct, and its origins come from language, which is public. Hence, my subjectivity as a realm of privacy impenetrable to the outside world, a mystery to which I have privileged access, loses its literal sense and appears to be a mere metaphor. It becomes evident that the objectivising functions of aesthetics play a unique, inimitable role in the process of developing subjectivity.

#### **4. Autobiographicity and autophilosophy: the functions of the essay**

As a particular form of self-reflection at the level of philosophical methodology, autobiographicity in its broad sense refers to another feature of Cavell's philosophical style associated with what I have been discussing above. Following David LaRocca, we may call this new feature "autophilosophy" (La Rocca 2019: 275–321; cf. also Rothman 2019: 107–108). According to LaRocca, it involves a perseverance mechanism, Cavell's permanent recollection of specific motifs of his own philosophical reflection undertaken again and again from a new perspective. In one of his countless attempts to characterise himself, Cavell writes as follows:

I understand the presence of notable, surprising anticipations to suggest something 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. (Rothman 2019: 105)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> "The practice of aesthetic debate thus contributes to the self-knowledge of all who participate and holds out the possibility of creating a freely willed community" (Mulhall 2011: 33).

<sup>17</sup> According to Cavell, "One may want to say: A human being can be a complete enigma to himself; he cannot find his feet with himself." Cavell, *Kierkegaard on Authority and Revelation* (Cavell 1976: 173).

<sup>18</sup> The reader of these texts may find it advisable and purposeful to adopt a similar strategy and endlessly keep returning to Cavell's texts to study them afresh and from a new perspective.

This philosophy entails a distinct interweaving and entangling of the same themes, yet at each subsequent consideration, enhanced in new configurations and layouts, constantly addressing them anew, in a new arrangement and release. Of course, this does not facilitate the work of an interpreter of Cavell's thought: his ideas are permanently *in statu nascendi*, continuously transforming and evolving, as if refusing to take a final, conclusive form.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, I think it would be justified, albeit not obvious, to associate Cavell's work with the essay as a literary genre: both are analytical in character, and the etymology of the French word *essai* aligns it with an "attempt" or "exercise". The characteristic features of Cavell's narrative that make them reminiscent of the essay would also include some of the structural qualities of Cavell's narrative. What I have in mind is his use of digressions and the "thinking in skips and jumps" we are familiar with in the essays of Montaigne, who is an influential author for Cavell, mainly in the context of scepticism (cf. Di Santo 2001; cf. also Filipczuk 2008).

According to Max Bense:

[...] an essayist is someone who not only treats her subject-matter in an experimental way, not only is constantly changing her subject-matter, but also — in the process of reshaping and communicating her own thoughts — discovers and rediscovers [ideas]. (Sendyka 2006: 36)<sup>20</sup>

At the risk of exaggerating, also with regard to Cavell's writings, one could venture the observation that:

[...] in the case of the essay, the shapelessness of the genre (its elusiveness and failure to strictly adhere to a specific range of subjects) could be circumvented only if a specific concept of oneself were adopted as the organising principle of the text. [...] If the projection of oneself becomes its underlying principle — only then will the multiplicity of the essay's dispersed textual elements and particles appear to be an explainable whole, unified and coherent. (Sendyka 2006: 48)

Yet even if one were to assume that for Cavell, so autophilosophy as he understood it would not mean a question of endless change as regards the subject of reflection, but rather an incessant observation of it from a new angle, a new vantage point to expand his own perspective — even then, one would still be dealing with a kind of mental experiment focused primarily on the writer himself.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein's well-known comment from the preface to his *Investigations*: "The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. [...] The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and meandering journeys. The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or lacking in character, marked by all the defects of a weak draughtsman" (Wittgenstein 1958: vii). It appears that a similar characteristic may be observed in Cavell's writing.

<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise noted in the references, the English translation of the quotes — M.F.

### Instead of closure

According to Michel Foucault, the [literary] experiment would involve a “modifying proclamation of self” (Foucault 1995: 149; cf. Nehamas 1986),<sup>21</sup> that is, being subject to an internal imperative to express oneself (cf. Cavell 1994: 6 et seq.) while exploring and actively co-creating the truth about oneself. Consequently, in the ongoing act of writing, which is constitutive for a subject, the “I” of the writer himself is modified. That is why the essay “occurs”<sup>22</sup> in the modality of writing perceived as an activity the result of which, as Sendyka points out, is a record that is “ultimately and ostentatiously subjective”, which is, admittedly, contrary to the notion of objectivity that lies behind all philosophy. Yet at the same time, it can be reconciled with a less rigorous sense of objectivity, which is possible in the context of the cognitive appreciation of autobiography (cf. Sendyka 2006: 47). Writing understood in this manner is additionally provided with an ethical dimension and extends the area of theoretical reflection by an ethics-related space of inner freedom (cf. Cavell, 1994: 6)

The opening up of that space, which presumably constitutes the true aim of writing, as Cavell understands it, possible thanks to self-knowledge, the sources of which are autobiographicity and self-analysis, heralds a major area in Cavell’s work: the realm of ethics. The self-creativity of writing inevitably has an ethical dimension and gives rise to the question of who I *may* become and who I *should* become. This refers to another important concept for Cavell in the context of shaping subjectivity, not only in view of autobiography as a source of philosophical inspiration: the concept of perfectionism developed by Ralph Waldo Emerson (see Cavell 2003; cf. also Hagberg 2008: 66 et seq.). In Cavell’s work, the doctrine of perfection determines a moral self-realisation aspired to, though probably without an understanding of the full extent of the ethical universe treated as an organic, internally coherent entirety. It arises from the notion of striving for a perfection that has never been implemented. This moral self-realisation establishes a horizon for the individual’s constant effort to transcend himself, which, in essence, is a never-ending, infinitely recurrent process.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, one may venture to say that the process of self-development and transcending oneself appears to be another crucial characteristic of subjectivity as understood by Cavell. According to Cavell, the idea of self-development understood in this way seems unattainable; one can only come closer to it.<sup>24</sup> Along with Emerson’s perfectionism, Cavell’s philosophical project moves from abstract theory to practice, guiding us to the

<sup>21</sup> For Cavell, an initial manifestation of such a “modifying proclamation of self” would be the symbolic birth of Cavell the writer, which happened when he took a new surname (Cavell 2010: 202).

<sup>22</sup> Assuming that, as the Structuralists wanted, writing is a type of game played within a structured system of characters which makes up a writing system (cf. Barthes 1977: 144–148).

<sup>23</sup> See Emerson’s “infinite of the private man” doctrine (Gould 1998: 104).

<sup>24</sup> Naoko Saito characterises this process as follows: “The essence of Emersonian moral perfectionism, as Cavell presents it, is the endless journey of self-overcoming and self-realization whose central focus is on the here and now in the process of attaining a further, next self, not the highest self. Drawing on Emerson’s idea of the ‘unattained but attainable self’ in ‘History,’ Cavell states, ‘the self is always attained, as well as to be attained.’” (Saito 2005: 53; cf. Rudrum 1974 et seq.).

“philosophy of the ordinary”, Cavell’s essential motto encompassing the philosophy of the world encountered by the mind “in its natural attitude,” not immersed in the element of philosophy (cf. Cavell 1988: 3–27).

However, to give a full discussion of the impact of Emerson’s ideas on Cavell and its philosophical consequences would call for a separate study.

---

## References

- Barthes Roland (1977), *Image, music, text*, trans. S. Heath, Fontana Press, London.
- Borradori Giovanna (1994), *An Apology for Skepticism* [in:] G. Borradori, *American Philosopher, Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Bremer Józef (2021), *Ludwig Wittgenstein o interpretacji marzeń sennych*, “Nauka” no. 3.
- Cavell Stanley (1976), *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Cavell Stanley (1979a), *Pursuit of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard Film Studies, Cambridge, MA.
- Cavell Stanley (1979b), *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Cavell Stanley (1979c), *The World Viewed*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA–London.
- Cavell Stanley (1987), *Freud and Philosophy: A Fragment*, “Critical Inquiry” vol. 13, no. 2, *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis* [winter].
- Cavell Stanley (1988), *In Quest of The Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Cavell Stanley (1988), *Themes out of School*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Cavell Stanley (1994), *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Cavell Stanley (1996), *Contesting Tears: The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Cavell Stanley (2003), *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Cavell Stanley (2010), *Little Did I Know. Excerpts from Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Critchley Simon (2005), *Cavell’s “Romanticism” and Cavell’s Romanticism* [in:] *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. R.B. Goodman, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Day William (2011), *A soteriology of reading: Cavell’s excerpts from memory* [in:] *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, literature and criticism*, eds. J. Loxley, A. Taylor, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

- DiSanto Michael John (2001), *Stanley Cavell's Skepticism and Shakespeare's Othello*, "Dalhousie Review" vol. 81, no. 3.
- Filipczuk Michał (2018), *Shakespeare and Skepticism. Stanley Cavell's interpretation of Othello*, "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich" no. 61(1).
- Filipczuk Michał (2023), *Stanley Cavell Philosophical Literary Criticism. An Outline of Method*, "The Ignatianum Philosophical Yearbook" no. 29(2).
- Fischer Michael (1989), *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Foucault Michel (1995), *What is an Author?* [in:] *Textual Strategies*, ed. J.V. Harari, Cornell University Press, Ithaca–New York.
- Hillman James (1983), *Healing Fiction*, Spring Publication, Inc., Barrytown, New York.
- Gould Timothy (1998), *Hearing Things*, University of Chicago, Chicago.
- Hagberg Garry (2008), *The Self. Reflected* [in:] G. Hagberg, *Describing Ourselves. Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Kovalainen Heikki (2010), *Emersonian Moral Perfectionism. An Alternative Ethics — But in What Sense?*, "European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy" no. 2(2).
- LaRocca David (ed.) (2019), *Inheriting Stanley Cavell. Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York.
- Mulhall Stephen (2011), *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Nehamas Alexander (1986), *What An Author Is*, "Journal of Philosophy" no. 83(11).
- Rothman William (2019), *Cavell Reading Cavell* [in:] *Inheriting Stanley Cavell. Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. D. LaRocca, Bloomsbury Academic, New York.
- Rudrum David (1974), *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Saito Naoko (2005), *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson*, Fordham University Press, New York.
- Sartre Jean-Paul (1964), *The Words*, Brazillier, New York.
- Schuff Jochen (2020), *Aesthetics and Autobiography in Cavell*, "Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics" no. 57(2).
- Sendyka Roma (2006), *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, TAIWPN Universitas, Kraków.
- White Hayden (2010), *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature and Theory, 1957–2007*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Wittgenstein Ludwig (1958), *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
-