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Ingeborg Löfgren

Interpretive Skepticism

Stanley Cavell, New Criticism, and Literary Interpretation

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Abstract
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This dissertation explores and analyzes *interpretive skepticism* in literary theory. It argues that traditional interpretive theories and debates often harbor unacknowledged forms of skeptical thinking and arguments. As these forms of skepticism are seldom recognized *as* skepticism, the problem tends to remain hidden and unresolved. The dissertation further argues that interpretive skepticism is (i) the result of a philosophical confusion, and (ii) practically harmful when used in order to regulate interpretive practice. Accordingly, a central purpose of the dissertation is to offer an analysis and taxonomy of what interpretive skepticism *is*. Only once we are in a position to understand and recognize it in its many guises will we be able to criticize and challenge it.

The first part of the dissertation thus aims at identifying a specific structure of skeptical reasoning within the theory of literary interpretation. In articulating this taxonomy and analysis, the study builds on the American philosopher Stanley Cavell's reinterpretation of epistemological skepticism in terms of tragedy, avoidance and repudiation of grammatical criteria. The second part of the study explores, in greater detail, interpretive skepticism within New Criticism. It centers on analyses of two classics within interpretive theory: "The Intentional Fallacy" by Monroe C. Beardsley (and W.K. Wimsatt) and "The Heresy of Paraphrase" by Cleanth Brooks. The study argues that Beardsley becomes both a so-called "skeptical twin" about literary interpretation and a straightforward literary other-minds skeptic with regard to authorial intentions. Brooks, for his part, becomes a straightforward skeptic about poetic interpretation and a "skeptical twin" about poetic meaning. Both theorists are investigated in comparison with Cavell's explorations of the themes of intention, overinterpretation, fraudulence, modernism, and aesthetic judgment in art, literature and criticism. Despite these skeptical findings, the study also argues that there are important similarities between Cavell's non-skeptical approach to literature and criticism, and New Critical "close reading."

The dissertation concludes with a chapter that leaves the confines of the New Critical idiom to explore interpretive skepticism within the tradition of so-called "hermeneutics of suspicion." Through readings of Susan Sontag, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Cora Diamond, it argues that suspicious or paranoid hermeneutics is not skeptical in itself but can become so through the skeptical temptations of dogmatism, authoritarianism, and fraudulence.

Keywords: interpretive skepticism, aesthetic skepticism, poetic skepticism, literary interpretation, interpretive theory, skepticism, Stanley Cavell, New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks, Monroe C. Beardsley, fraudulence, modernism, escape to theory

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For David

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The work that has led up to this book has been exciting, challenging and stimulating. But it has also been, as Stenström predicted, difficult, bewildering and utterly frustrating. As I sought to work at the intersection between philosophy and literary studies I often felt homeless, intellectually speaking: I was neither a "real" philosopher nor a "real" scholar of literature. I could neither trust that my philosopher friends would be interested in the philosophical problems of literature specifically – that they would take them as compelling problems of interest and importance. Nor could I count on my literary colleagues to share my sense of the urgent philosophical work awaiting us with respect to skeptical theorizations about interpretation.

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Introduction: What Is Interpretive Skepticism and Why Do We Never Hear About It?

"That is only *your* interpretation." When someone says this it is usually an expression of a (at least partial) rejection of your interpretive claim. If your interpretation is *only* your interpretation, this signals a limitation of its validity in a special way. Perhaps your interlocutor has a competing interpretation, perhaps your interpretation was a challenge to his or her own. Perhaps these words are uttered in order to end any further discussion. You are entitled to your interpretation, he or she is entitled to his or her interpretation, let us leave it at that. But as we all know, we cannot always leave it at that. Interpretive clashes can hurt, they can even wound us. Sometimes, though hardly always, different ways of interpreting something can seem incomprehensible and outrageous, either morally or intellectually. If what is at stake is something important, and especially if the other person is someone that matters to you as well, the discussion must go on. Are we speaking past one another, are we really speaking about the same thing? Or are we truly this different in how we understand something (as important and fundamental as *this*)? The phrase may also be a *complete* rejection of the validity of your claim, in the form of a rejection of *you*. It might mean: "I do not care enough about you to sort this out, or explain to you how (I think) you are completely wrong." Or it may mean: "If this is how you see things, if you see *this* like *that*, then I no longer desire to discuss things with you. Certain things cannot be open to discussion or debate. If that is how you see things in the world, then I do not want to be part of your world."

In the case of literary interpretation, it is rare that interpretive debates have such dramatic results. It is hard to imagine how, for example, a conflict over William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* or William Wordsworth's Lucy-poems could end a marriage or be the tipping point where a friendship starts to go downhill. But perhaps that happens too. In any case passionate readers of literature can become deeply disappointed when, say, a dear friend cannot share their excitement over a particularly cherished piece of literature, and most poetry lovers, I assume, recognize the special sense of almost blessed intimacy that a shared interpretation can generate. There is an experience of clarity, community, beauty, and surprised release that comes with having (what you with ascending wonder realize is) your *exact* understanding of a poem expressed by someone else's words. An understanding you could not

have articulated yourself. This experience may not only open up the poem for you, making it accessible for your comprehension and enjoyment. It may also, as it were, simultaneously open you and the world to one another in a similar way, making you readable to one another. Such precious moments of shared understanding can have a tremendous capacity to exorcise existential isolation.

Academic disputes over conflicting interpretations are not always coolly "academic" either. Most literary scholars have probably frequented conferences and seminars where interpretive conflicts have caused passion, outrage, indignation. Of course such disputes can spring from strictly "academic" concerns, being the result of the clash of competing schools or critical and theoretical traditions, and sometimes it can even be rooted in more sordid reasons for competition, such as acrimonious fights over the same academic positions. But the discord may also be more deeply felt, troubling the heart of the academic reader in a more profound way.

I can for instance recall a conference I attended not so long ago where the question of whether or not a poem was romantically describing a *rape*, whether it did not portray rape at all, or whether it was using rape "merely" as a poetic vehicle to describe the fearful awe the poet felt when possessed by his muse, caused not only a heated discussion (about rape and rape culture, about "moralism" and anachronism as being two of the greatest threats to criticism, about how aesthetic issues can (or cannot) be loaded with moral ones, etc.), but also generated a great sense of mistrust and hostility among the participants afterwards, who gave responses like these:

"How could the professor even *try* to *deny* the motif of rape in the poem when it is so obviously there." "Why was he *avoiding* it, it makes no sense?" "He was avoiding it precisely because he knew we would have this fruitless discussion about the poem's morality if he brought it up." "But the discussion turned bad only because he was trying *not to read the poem*! I am not criticizing his moral stance towards rape but his 'morality' as a reader. You have to respect what the poem says." "Exactly! If he had acknowledged that the motif was there, we could have gone on to discuss how it functions *poetically* in the poem, that's not moralism." "No, we would just have ended up in some predictable and poetically pointless condemnation of rape *and* of the poem." "That is not true!" "It is! I have seen this kind of discussion before, it always abandons the poetry in the end. Besides, the poem is not *really* about rape anyway, you are missing the point." "Nonsense, of course it is about rape!" "You are being too simplistic about this. Surely we can discuss *the moral of the poem* without becoming moralists! We do not need to *evaluate* the poem morally." "Well, why should we not be allowed to do so? Why did that white, male, middle-aged professor choose this particular poem in the first place? The choice itself is not innocent." "See what I mean? Now, we should not have read the poem at all – and in fact you do not seem to have

done that! You are stuck on the very surface of the poem." People were very frustrated and the agitation would just not subside.[1]

In situations like these, questions about the nature of interpretive validity, whether or not two conflicting interpretations can both be valid, as well as questions regarding interpretive authority, can present themselves naturally and urgently. Can a poem both be and not be about rape, depending on the interpretation? Can both interpretations be valid? How do we know? What sorts of data are relevant in settling the question? What does it mean to settle it? Can it be settled? With what kind of authority can either interpretation be asserted? And what sort of validity are we dealing with here – are the valid interpretations *true?* Or should we evaluate them with the use of other categories (admissible/inadmissible, probable/improbable, good/bad, etc.)? How do we know? *Do* we know?

But it is not only in cases where moral issues have a central and decisive role in interpretive conflicts that theoretical questions like these become pressing. Aside from situations where ethical or existential issues are obviously present, theoretical queries can feel vital in numerous other cases. It can happen in teaching when you meet students who question your (and/or the discipline's) interpretive authority, or while trying to convince a non-scholar – who considers literary interpretations personal and inherently subjective – that academic interpretation indeed contains *arguments* and *rationality*. Or you may just at some point, while acquainting yourself with literary theory, simply have considered some of these theoretical queries but have never found convincing and satisfying answers. In any case, for the literary scholar, the interpretation cannot, ever, *just* be my interpretation. Its validity has to be greater than that, otherwise the entire discipline of literary studies seems a far too shaky and subjective business.

In what follows I will address theoretical questions about the nature, logic, and limits of literary interpretation to the extent that these questions gravitate towards, and help me articulate, the problem of *interpretive skepticism*. The main questions of the present work are: What is interpretive skepticism with regard to an understanding of literature? Is there even such a thing? If so, what is its nature, logic, and expression? About *what* in literary interpretation is the interpretive skeptic raising doubts? What fuels interpretive skepticism and who may be afflicted by it? How should we understand and deal with it? How can we, and should we even, overcome it?

In this book I investigate what interpretive skepticism *is*, or perhaps more moderately, I want at least to show what it *can be*, since I am neither trying to give, nor think that anyone in principle could give, exhaustive, definitive, or final answers to what constitutes interpretive skepticism. Especially since such answers depend upon what conception of "literary interpretation" and "skepticism" one is working with. What prompts me to raise the problem of

[1] The professor in question was presenting a paper that discussed William Butler Yeats's

interpretive skepticism is nonetheless a sense or a suspicion on my part that much of modern theorizing on literary interpretation is in fact skeptical at heart, but that this interpretive skepticism is not, or at least only rarely, recognized as being a form of skepticism at all.

In my view, a plausible reason for this absence of recognition is that we, who theorize or philosophize about interpretation in literary studies, often lack a clear (enough) analysis or understanding of what skepticism is. And since, as I shall furthermore argue, skeptical reasoning as it enters and unfolds in the field of literary interpretation also takes on its own specific characteristics, which distinguishes it from other forms of skepticism, this particular kind of skepticism becomes even harder to detect.

Consequently then, I think that interpretive skepticism not only too often goes undetected but as a *result* (and indeed *because* of it) this problem remains uncontested in literary theory. Since I will furthermore claim that this skeptical reasoning is in itself philosophically flawed, that moreover it is *both* a symptom of a philosophical confusion *and* an escape into theory – that is, a flight from the real problems of interpretive practice that (for the most part) first spurred the theoretical effort – this is a situation literary studies cannot settle with or turn a blind eye to. My conviction is that unless we remedy this lack of theoretical overview we risk continuing, unwittingly, the reproduction of skeptical and clouded conceptions of literary interpretation in our very effort to bring about clarity – sometimes even in our very efforts to rid ourselves of skeptical anxieties. So, to answer the second part of the question announced in the opening heading of this chapter and book: the reason why we hardly ever hear about "interpretive skepticism" is neither because it does not exist, nor because it is not causing us trouble. We do not talk about interpretive skepticism because we have hitherto not answered the first part of the question: we do not know what interpretive skepticism is, and therefore we cannot recognize it even when we encounter it.

What then is interpretive skepticism? I will argue that the term should not be confined to literary theorists who doubt or deny that we can ever tell valid interpretations from invalid ones, or who doubt or deny that the distinction itself is meaningful, or who doubt or deny that we know the criteria of interpretive validity or, more fundamentally, what interpretation is *as such*. I will apply the term to *any* view that takes our authority, competence and knowledge with regard to literary interpretive practice to ultimately be in need of theoretical underpinning – to be in need of an interpretive theory. I take the very raising of theoretical questions concerning the nature, logic, and validity in literary interpretation in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute interpretive skepticism, regardless of whether that theory takes itself to have been able to provide such a theoretical foundation or not.[2]

[2] I am here alluding to the following passage in Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*: "I do not […] confine the term [skepticism] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I

Cavell, Skepticism, and New Criticism

The most central thinker for this work, in more than one respect, is the American philosopher Stanley Cavell (1926–). Cavell has famously announced himself to have two main teachers: Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and J.L. Austin (1911–1960), both well-known for their appeal to ordinary language and to everyday language use as a fruitful way to deal with problems of skepticism. Cavell is renowned not only for his extensive writings on film, opera, literature, tragedy, Shakespeare, modernism, romanticism, America and American thinkers like Thoreau and Emerson, but in particular for his groundbreaking reinterpretation of skepticism and on how we should understand Wittgenstein's appeal to the ordinary as a response to skepticism.[3]

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apply it to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge. […] [I take] the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute skepticism, regardless of whether a philosophy takes itself to have *answered* the question affirmatively or negatively." Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (1979) (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 46. In chapter 3, I will work out in more detail how this quote has a bearing on my own analysis of interpretive skepticism.

[3] In the introduction to *Wittgenstein and Scepticism* (2004), Denis McManus writes that "[s]cepticism […] is arguably the most significant motif in post-Cartesian philosophy and shapes not only its epistemology but also its metaphysics, its philosophy of mind and its philosophy of language." Denis McManus, "Introduction," *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, ed. Denis McManus (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 9. In this context McManus describes Cavell as "To date […] Wittgenstein's most inspirational, most provocative and simply deepest reader." McManus, "Introduction," p. 15. See also Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (1969), updated edition (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971), enlarged edition, Harvard Film Studies (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1979); *The Senses of Walden* (1972), an expanded edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard Film Studies (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981); *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (1984) (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (1987), updated edition (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2003); *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988); *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989); *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The Carus Lectures 1988 (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1990); *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, The Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994); *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, The Bucknell Lectures in Literary Theory, general eds. Michael Payne and Harold Schweizer (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995); *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge and London: The Belknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow (Cambridge and London: The Belknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

Cavell's work will figure in two different ways in this study, corresponding to the two parts of this book. In Part I my overarching aim is to distinguish between some general forms in which, I propose, the skeptical problematic in theorizing about literary interpretation generally tends to take. What I want to create here is a model or taxonomy of interpretive skepticism as a broad theoretical phenomenon within modern literary theory. This means that in part I, Cavell's famous analyses of external-world-, other-minds-, and meaning skepticism – especially how, first and foremost, these forms of skepticism are expressed in *The Claim of Reason* (1979), and *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969) – will serve both as my philosophical framework and theoretical toolbox in endeavoring to bring into clear focus the problem of interpretive skepticism.

It is my belief here that while Cavell indeed provides us with essential resources to differentiate modes of skeptical thinking, an analysis of *interpretive skepticism* as a specific skeptical problem cannot be achieved through a simple "application" of his "results" onto this new "area" of literary interpretation. Theorizing about interpretation has, I hope to show, its own particular way of structuring the skeptical problematic to which one needs to be sensitive and to take into account. The form that this specific modality takes is identical neither to external-world-, other-minds- nor meaning skepticism, as Cavell analyzes them. The difficulties of interpretation and the difficulties of philosophy (or theory) of interpretation need to be carefully balanced against each other if we are to render an accurate picture of the problem.

After having presented in Part I a more general account of the features of interpretive skepticism, Part II will explore, in more detail, how these features operate effectively within a specific "school" of criticism, namely New Criticism. Though it may at first appear odd to choose such an orientation – considered by many to be outdated and theoretically naïve – as an example of modern theory haunted by skepticism, there are reasons for doing so.

First, since New Criticism is perhaps the *least* likely candidate one would imagine to be skeptical with regard to literature and criticism, this makes it function not only as an interesting example or *test* case but also as a kind of *hard* case. If I am able to show that New Criticism, which purportedly considered poems and their meanings to be both stable and knowable (however full of ambiguity and paradox they may be), is nonetheless deeply troubled by skepticism, then this would not only mean furnishing us with a new understanding of New Criticism, it would more importantly offer a good and clear instance of how such "invisible" or "hidden" interpretive skepticism can be exposed in the future. The case of New Criticism might therefore provide a model for how to approach and scrutinize other theoretical orientations that*, prima facie,* do not *look* skeptical, helping us to recognize the subtle signs that nevertheless can be found therein.

Secondly, if a skeptical outlook marked and marred (at least some of) the New Critic's theorizing about literary interpretation, it is not unlikely that

ensuing theoretical orientations, even when directly opposing the New Critical idiom, have all the same reproduced the skeptical way of formulating *questions* about interpretation and interpretive validity, even if they offer different *answers*. I focus on two of the most influential New Critics and two of their most canonized texts: Monroe C. Beardsley's and W.K. Wimsatt's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), and Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), and in it particularly "The Heresy of Paraphrase." Considering the centrality of these works in the tradition of interpretive theory I believe that the case of New Criticism will prove to have relevance beyond itself.

Thirdly, New Criticism is a particularly interesting case in point because it contains such diverse responses to the skeptical threat to which I claim it is reacting. Some of these responses do indeed lead to a kind of skepticism about interpretation (even in the process of refuting skepticism). But other responses point in a completely opposite direction, offering substantial insights on how we might rid ourselves of skeptical anxieties. The case of New Criticism can thus also show us how to tackle skepticism in a helpful way, if not by theory then very well *through practice*. I do not critique the New Critics in order to disregard them. On the contrary, an important task is to acknowledge and to recover some of their best insights on the matter of interpretation and doubt and how certain doubts concerning literary interpretation and poetic meaningfulness can be dissolved.

This brings me to my fourth reason for choosing New Criticism as an example or test case, and therewith also to the second role Cavell will play in the book. While Cavell's own views on the relation between philosophy and skepticism on the on hand, and literature, modernism, reading, interpretation, on the other, are *not* addressed in the formation of the overall model of interpretive skepticism I will be developing in Part I, it strikes me as being of special interest that some of Cavell's most illuminating texts on these topics are also texts discussing New Criticism. Therefore, in the second part of the book, Cavell will not only bequeath to us a veritable philosophical toolbox for hammering and chiseling out the problem of interpretive skepticism, rather, he will partly enter as an object of study in his own right. What I would like to do in Part II is to trace out not only the skeptical reasoning of Beardsley and Brooks as it can be analyzed through my general model from Part I. I hope to go further and explicate Cavell's own critique of New Criticism in *Must We Mean What We Say?* While Cavell has not worked out a general model or structure for the skeptical problematic as it befalls theorizations about interpretation, he has, however, articulated a critique of both anti-intentionalism and a problematic he calls "fraudulence" in modernist art and art-criticism, while discussing Beardsley and Brooks. These two discussions, I claim, actually distinguish two subsets of skepticism intimately related to interpretive criticism. I will label these "literary skepticism about

other minds" and "poetic skepticism," respectively.[4] However, as I said before, New Criticism is interesting because it is diverse in its dealings with skepticism. What I wish to do by reading Cavell against Beardsley and Brooks is not only to bring out Cavell's critique of their hidden skepticism, and thereby further clarify the logic of interpretive skepticism, I am committed to the idea that there remain theoretically sound aspects of New Criticism for which Cavell's critique fails to account, but which can be brought out by a comparison of the two. This is especially the case, I contend, with Cleanth Brooks. In Brooks one finds, and this Cavell misses, some fruitful ways to tackle skepticism – ways in fact similar to Cavell's own.

Cavell, Philosophy, Literature, and Criticism

Cavell's philosophizing about skepticism and its rich and intricate relation to literature has received scholarly attention both from philosophy and literary studies. This is hardly surprising. In the fourth part of *The Claim of Reason*, devoted to the exploration of other-minds skepticism in particular, Cavell constantly relates the problem of knowing others to literary matters such as reading, writing, forms of narration and imaginativeness – he even creates thought experiments that border on fairy tales and science fiction. The book furthermore ends with Cavell's well-known and lengthy interpretation of Shakespeare's *Othello* in which he demonstrates how Shakespeare's plays can help us recognize skepticism about other minds as an existential tragedy rather than a theoretical puzzle. On the final page of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell writes that the deadly fate of both Desdemona and Othello creates "an emblem of human separation" which also expresses "the truth of skepticism."[5] However, this truth of skepticism, which Cavell thinks tragedy helps us to understand, will not be satisfactorily acknowledged or even seen by philosophy as "long as philosophy continues, as it has from the first, to demand the banishment of poetry from its republic."[6] Yet, Cavell muses, what if philosophy itself became literature? The book ends with the enigmatic question: "But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?"[7]

This very question, inviting further reflection and elaboration, as well as Cavell's own interpretation of skepticism as tragedy, has not only revitalized, contributed to, and allowed for a renewed analysis of the "ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry – a quarrel that (Plato's) Socrates considered to be ancient already as he banished the poets from the ideal state – it

[4] The latter is, as I will explain in chapter 6, in turn a subset of what I will call "aesthetic skepticism."
[5] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 496.
[6] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 496.
[7] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 496.

has also inspired many scholars admiring Cavell to follow his lead.[8] There are thus a wide range of works following in Cavell's footsteps, exploring the relation between skepticism and literature, or skepticism and tragedy, or skepticism and Shakespeare, knowledge and morality, philosophy/skepticism and modernism, philosophy/skepticism and romanticism, philosophy/skepticism and film, community, pedagogy, feminism and politics, etc.[9] At the same time, while Cavell's philosophical works have been productive for similar investigations of literature and film, one of Cavell's most central thoughts on the relation between philosophy and literature (or film) is that it cannot merely be one of pre-established theoretical insight and application or illustration – the relation is not hierarchal in that way:

> The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of

[8] See especially book III, 397d–398b and book X, 607a–607c in *The Republic*, transl. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper associate ed. D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 1034–1035, p. 1211.

[9] Cf. *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, eds. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994),Timothy Gould, *Hearing Things: Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1998), *Stanley Cavell,* ed. Richard Eldridge, Contemporary Philosophy in Focus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), *Contending with Stanley Cavell* ed. Russell Goodman (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), *Reading Cavell*, eds. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (London: Routledge, 2006), *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy* ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), Lawrence Rhu, *Stanley Cavell's American Dream: Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Hollywood Movies* (New York: Fordham, 2006), *Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups* eds. Naoko Saito and Paul Standish (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), Charles Altieri, "Wonder in *The Winter's Tale*: A Cautionary Account of Epistemic Criticism," in, *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge* eds. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, Luca Pocci (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 266–86, Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2012), Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Garry Hagberg, *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Viktor Johansson, *Dissonant Voices: Philosophy, Children's Literature, and Perfectionist Education* (Stockholm: Department of Education, Stockholm University, 2013), Toril Moi, "Becoming Modern: Modernity and Theater in *Emperor and Galilean*," in *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 188–222, Toril Moi "'I Am a Woman': The Personal and the Philosophical," in *What Is A Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 121–250, Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), Benjamin Ogden, "What Philosophy Can't Say About Literature: Stanley Cavell and *Endgame*," *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 33. No. 1 (April 2009), pp. 126–138, Linda S. Raphael, *Narrative Skepticism: Moral Agency and Representations of Consciousness in Fiction* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Associated University Presses, 2001), Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), Ewa Ziarek, *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

> skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean texts, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance. Sympathy with my project depends, on the contrary, on unsettling the matter of priority (as between philosophy and literature, say) implied in the concepts of illustration and application. The plays I take up form respective interpretations of skepticism as they yield to interpretation by skepticism.[10]

This not only means that tragedy can illuminate the understanding of skepticism just as conceptions of skepticism can illuminate tragedy, but that literature in a sense conducts its own philosophizing. It has potentially equal authority to philosophize on whatever is investigated by its own discourse as established genres of philosophical writing have. Likewise, the literary style and form of traditional philosophical writing (whether dialogue, meditation, essay, contemporary academic article or thesis, etc.), are highlighted as philosophically significant by Cavell. In order to understand the *content* of these texts, thoughts, and arguments, attention to *form* is essential.

This view of the dialogical relation between philosophy and what is philosophized "on" of course also has an important bearing for those following Cavell, especially those who wish to use his philosophy in their own readings of literature. This may pose something of a problem, or as Toril Moi puts it: "How can we read philosophically without reducing the text to a witting or unwitting illustration of a pre-existing theory?"[11] This feature of Cavell's philosophical treatment of literature may in turn partly explain what Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie call "the intellectual resistance that has led literary critics, as it were, to avoid Cavell."[12] In their introduction to *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* (2011), Eldridge and Rhie reflect upon the nature of this resistance and write:

> It would seem, therefore, that literary critics in particular, would have much to gain by engaging seriously with Cavell's work. Yet widespread admiration for Cavell by literary critics has only infrequently resulted in anything discernable as real intellectual influence. Indeed, the ambivalent reception of Cavell in literary studies (an odd mixture of admiration and apathy, which seem to treat him as worthy of praise yet somehow safe to ignore) is a vexing curiosity […]. Compared to the palpable influence upon literary studies of others of Cavell's philosophical contemporaries (Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan, or now Levinas and Deleuze, to name only the most obvious) the extent to which Cavell has been overlooked, even avoided, by literary critics is striking indeed.[13]

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[10] Stanley Cavell, "Introduction," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 1.
[11] Toril Moi, "The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir," *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, eds. Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie (New York and London: Continuum 2011), p. 19.
[12] Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie, "Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, p. 3.
[13] Eldridge and Rhie, "Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," p. 2. Garrett Stewart similarly asks six years earlier "why has this

The very anthology which Eldridge and Rhie are responsible for introducing is of course an attempt to remedy this neglect. So is *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism* (2011) edited by James Loxley and Andrew Taylor, in which William Day similarly ponders upon the fact that "[t]he difficulty in understanding Stanley Cavell's relation to literary criticism is felt, typically if not most acutely, not so much by those trained in philosophy as by those trained in literary criticism."[14]

One plausible reason for this "mixture of admiration and apathy" is precisely that Cavell's work cannot, and should not, be treated as a fixed theory, readily *applicable* and possible to turn into some form of *method* of literary interpretation. As David Rudrum writes in *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (2013): "In this respect, Cavell is emphatically *not* a literary theorist, and if readers of this book hope or anticipate that its task is to expound some kind of 'Cavellian theory of literature' or 'Cavellian literary theory,' they will be – and quite possibly deserve to be – disappointed: such terms are vapid oxymorons."[15] Instead, Rudrum suggests, "Cavell's writing on literature provide us with what we might call an alternative to literary theory."[16] But what that alternative is can be hard to discern. In *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (2003), edited by Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost, there are different articulations of, and attempts to design, critical approaches that draw upon Cavell's philosophy without resorting to mere applications of pre-established theoretical results. Dauber and Jost describe ordinary language criticism, or simply OLC, in the following way:

> Since the ambition of ordinary language criticism is to return criticism to its ground in the "ordinary" or natural language we all speak, it is hardly even a rubric and offers little hope for systematic organization. We might go so far as to say that all criticism is really ordinary language criticism, that is, when criticism *is* criticism as opposed to something else (quasi-scientific theory, or ideology, or even nonsense). […] First, we mean OLC to take as its point of departure the so-called ordinary language philosophy deriving especially from Ludwig Wittgenstein in the early twentieth century. More important, we mean to register by it a departure from what we take to be the dead end of contemporary critical theory, much of which, in contemning the ordinary and

work been to a discernable extent overlooked in the discussions that stand most to gain from engaging it?" Garrett Stewart, "The Avoidance of Stanley Cavell," *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p. 140.

[14] William Day, "A Soteriology of Reading: Cavell's Excerpts from Memory," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, eds. James Loxley and Andrew Taylor (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 76.

[15] David Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2013), p. 4.

[16] Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, p. 10.

> familiar, proceeds in the direction of what is almost programmatically abstract and remote.[17]

This study aligns itself with and in some important respects resembles OLC's work in the following way: first of all, I shall also scrutinize theory, ideology, and (what I will claim is) hidden nonsense in literary theory, through appeals to interpretive practice and in a manner inspired by Cavell (as well as Wittgenstein via Cavell). Consistent with the presuppositions of OLC I think that certain theoretical problems of criticism can only be solved if we return them to critical practice, or what I will call from this point onwards "the rough ground of interpretation."[18] Finally, I fully endorse their critique of "the attempt by some contemporary theorists to use theory as a means of mitigating or undoing reading altogether," and applaud OLC for its challenge of the "present day rule of theory not because it is 'against theory' but because it is against rules."[19]

However, since I am undertaking a philosophical investigation into interpretive theory rather than engaging in literary criticism, there are significant differences to note as well. Firstly, while I do not wish to simply apply Cavell's analysis of skepticism to some other material (in this case not literature, but literary interpretive theory), nevertheless I have decided to *use* Cavell, and I wish to do so *systematically*. With this in mind, I need to be careful in how I describe my particular approach, so as to avoid what Moi warned us about in the earlier cited quotation. Working in a tradition inspired by Wittgenstein and Cavell I am accustomed to a tendency among certain followers of Wittgenstein to be rather cautious about using some of his most famous terms, like "language games," "forms of life," or "family resemblance." The main reason for exercising such caution is that these heuristic tools or objects of comparison – construed for the purpose of dissolving certain philosophical problems – are easily mistaken for building blocks of a new (metaphysical) theory of language.[20] That is, instead of being seen as therapeutic

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[17] Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost, "Introduction: The Varieties of Ordinary Language Criticism," *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, eds. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost, Rethinking Theory, general ed. Gary Saul Morson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), p. xi. See also Walter Jost, *Rhetorical Investigations: Studies in Ordinary Language Criticism* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004). Of course the OLC critics are not initiating something completely unprecedented here. At least since Morris Weitz's seminal article "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" from 1956, Wittgenstein has been a significant point of reference for critiques of the proliferation of theory in aesthetical and critical matters. See Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Sep., 1956), pp. 27–35.

[18] Dauber and Jost, "Introduction: The Varieties of Ordinary Language Criticism," p. xv.

[19] Dauber and Jost, "Introduction: The Varieties of Ordinary Language Criticism," p. xii.

[20] Wittgenstein writes: "Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regimentation of language – as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance. The language-games are rather set up as *objects of comparison* which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimi-

tools, created to analyze and disperse the (confused) desire for a general theory of language, these terms are treated as parts of an *alternative*, equally general, theory of language. Such anxiety among Wittgensteinians and Cavellians can make them suspicious (sometimes I would say disproportionately so) of the deployment of specialized terms and concepts – misgivings which by all means are often well-founded since there is a real and palpable risk of hypostatizing technical or analytical terms in a philosophically confused manner.[21] It is in light of this worry that I understand Dauber and Jost's observation that "OLC critics tend to put their questions in terms less technical than is usual in current academic discourse. Their styles, typically free of catchwords and metadiscursive jargon."[22] While I take this to be a fruitful way to do literary criticism (but certainly not *the* only way) I am less wary than others of the use of either technical terms or specialized jargon *per se* in literary criticism, theory or in philosophy. So long as: (i) such terms do their work and (ii) the presence of concepts and technical notions does not exclude, in any unnecessary manner, potential readers from following the presented discourse. The kind of philosophical problems subtending the use of *jargon* come, as I see it, first and foremost when language is *idling*, not when it works as it should.[23]

In this study, I will draw quite heavily on some analytical terms I have picked up from my engagement with Cavell as well as from James Conant (like Wittgensteinian/grammatical criteria vs. Austinian/technical criteria, questions of "being *so*" vs. questions of "*being* so," Cartesian skepticism vs. Kantian skepticism, etc.). Moreover, I will have reason to use some terms I have sought to develop in dialogue with the ideas of Cavell and Conant (for example Wittgensteinian/grammatical authority vs. Austinian/expert/technical/professional authority).[24] The point of this vocabulary is

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larities." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), The German text, with a Revised English Translation by G.E.M Anscombe, 50th Anniversary edition (Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford, Victoria, 2008), §130, p. 43e. See also Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 7, 19, 23, 66–71, 241, pp. 4e, 7e, 10e, 27e–29e.

[21] Cf. "For we can avoid ineptness or emptiness in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, an object of comparison – as, so to speak, a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 131, p. 43e.

[22] Dauber and Jost, "Introduction: The Varieties of Ordinary Language Criticism," p. xiii.

[23] This is also how I understand the following remarks by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*: "We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language; an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order. To this end we shall constantly be giving prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook. This may make it look as if we saw it as our task to reform language. Such a reform for particular practical purposes, an improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, is perfectly possible. But these are not the cases we have to do with. The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it's doing its work." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 132, pp. 43e–44e.

[24] These terms will be explained in chapters 2–3.

not to insist on the terms themselves but to establish a taxonomy that can help us see, and hopefully treat, specific philosophical problems in interpretive theory. With my proposed taxonomy and analytical model I am trying to make explicit certain logical connections and to create an *übersichtliche Darstellung*, or perspicuous representation, in order to make the problematic of interpretive skepticism visible at all.[25] This furthermore means that while the order of the chapters may suggest a more straightforward processes – of first accounting for Cavell's philosophy, then applying his results to interpretive theory, and then, in a final step, applying my analytical model to New Criticism – this structure is more reflective of pedagogical considerations regarding the presentation of this investigation than adequately capturing the process by which I thought about these matters. These dispositional issues are motivated by my firm belief that certain thoughts and terms need to be in place before I can demonstrate what interpretive skepticism is and how it informs New Criticism.

One of the most significant moments in the criss-cross-reading process that facilitated my understanding of interpretive skepticism was my encounter with Michael Fischer's *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (1989).[26] Fischer's book is one of the earliest works on Cavell, literature and skepticism and he is in fact also the only one among Cavell scholars working on the intersection between philosophy and literature that, to my knowledge, has more or less the same aim as I do with this study. *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* traces structural similarities between Cavell's analysis of skepticism and skepticism in literary theory, and I will devote a substantial part of chapter 3 to Fischer's thoughts and arguments.[27] I believe the aforementioned suspicion against generality, systematization, and "application" among followers of Cavell and Wittgenstein can help to explain why this is so. Other scholars in the Cavellian tradition working on matters relevant for my investigation of interpretive skepticism are predominantly David Rud-

[25] "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 122, p. 42e.

[26] Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989). See also "And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 66, p. 27e.

[27] Besides Cavell and Fischer, both James Conant and Talbot Taylor will also prove important in my development of an analytical model of interpretive skepticism. But while Taylor is clearly inspired by Wittgenstein and Conant presents one of the most helpful developments of Cavell's analysis of skepticism, neither is trying to do what both Fischer and I aim at, namely, to use Cavell's analysis of skepticism in order to bring out a *specific* form of skepticism pertaining to interpretive literary theory. James Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," in *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, pp. 97–136; Talbot J. Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding: Scepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation* (London: Duke University Press, Routledge, 1992).

rum, Colin Davis, and the contributors to the two previously cited anthologies on Cavell and literature and literary criticism.

David Rudrum's *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature* (2013) is especially interesting here since Rudrum is not only proposing with Cavell that "instead of needing a set of theoretical terms with which to approach literature, we must learn to read it on its own terms," but he is also one of the few who actually deals a little more extensively with Cavell's treatment of New Criticism.[28] Rudrum furthermore discusses Cavell and interpretation in a very illuminating way, even though he, to my mind, overstates the difference between "reading" and "interpreting" in Cavell.[29] However, Rudrum never really relates these topics to a particular kind of skepticism in literary theory.

Colin Davis, for his part, is interesting because his *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell* (2010) focuses on the boundary between interpretation and overinterpretation in Cavell's (among other philosophers') work. I will argue that this boundary plays an important role for certain versions of interpretive skepticism. I will also discuss Davis's contention that Cavell is an "overreader", in Davis's honorific sense, when grappling with the interpretive skepticism of Beardsley in chapter 5.

Many of the contributors to *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism* and *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism* focus on a cluster of topics central to my understanding of certain forms of interpretive skepticism and especially poetic skepticism, namely the relation between modernism, aesthetic judgment, fraudulence, and the logic and authority of "what we say when." On the last of these topics one could pause in order to add a further reason why, according to Eldridge and Rhie, Cavell has not been as influential as expected in literary studies. His appeals to "what we say when" are sometimes "taken to be a form of 'commons-room' authoritarianism that is both class-biased and inattentive to the varieties of

[28] Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 7. Also, see especially chapter 2 and 4. New Criticism is fairly often *mentioned* when those texts by Cavell discussing New Criticism are analyzed, but the discussion rarely goes beyond that. In *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, R.M. Berry discusses Cavell's treatment of aesthetic judgment, modernism and fraudulence – and mentions Brooks in this context – but without actually analyzing Brooks or his work in relation to these topics. See R.M. Berry, "'Is "Us" Me?' Cultural Studies and the Universality of Aesthetic Judgments," *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, p. 39. Likewise, in the same anthology, Anthony J. Cascardi brings up Cavell's critique of New Criticism in relation to Cavell's reading of *King Lear* but New Criticism is never really the focus of that discussion. Anthony J. Cascardi, "Cavell and Kant: The Work of Criticism and the Work of Art," *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, p. 49. Charles Warren writes in his contribution to *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, how Allen Tate, as "typifying the American New Criticism," was "so important in Cavell's formation," but Warren never delves further into the relation between Cavell and the New Critics. Charles Warren, "Philosophy/literature/criticism/film," *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, p. 188.

[29] Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, see chapter 1, especially pp. 29–30.

demotic speech."[30] I think that this particular misunderstanding surrounding Cavell can be compared to a similar misunderstanding commonly associated with the interpretive authority of New Critical close readings. The irony here is that *both* Cavell's philosophical appeal to "what we say when" *and* a substantial part of New Critical appeals to what "we" can see through the practice of close reading are – in my view – distinctly *anti-authoritarian*. Both cases constitute an *invitation* to the reader to see if they can see what the philosopher/critic sees, and requires the active participation and judgment of the reader. For Cavell and the New Critics critical validity is not summoned by and through appeals to professional authority.

This is something Eldridge also notes in his *Literature, Life and Modernity* (2008) and I will discuss the similarity I find between close reading and Cavell on this matter in chapter 6.[31] As many readers of Cavell have stressed, among them Espen Hammer, "aesthetic judgment 'models'" for Cavell "salient features of the judgments made by philosophers of ordinary language when they point to 'what we say when and the implications thereof.'"[32] Similarly, in chapter 3 of his *Against Voluptuous Bodies* (2006), R.M. Bernstein reminds us that:

> Cavell has always proclaimed an intimacy, at times amounting to a virtual identity, between the *logic* of aesthetic claiming (the logic appropriate to our claims, evaluative and interpretive, about works of art and, by extension, the logic of those works, their claiming) and the *logic* peculiar to ordinary language philosophy ("what we say when" and "what we mean when we say it").[33]

For me, the similarity between the authority and logic of saying "what we say when," and the authority and logic of aesthetic judgment, will not only be central for my analysis of New Critical close reading. It is central for my entire understanding of the authority and logic of interpretive claims as such – as well as for my accounting of skeptical doubt concerning these things.

Another topic in Cavell relevant for my analysis of interpretive skepticism is how the nature of authority in criticism plays out among interpretive peers as well as in teacher–student relations. James Loxley and Andrew Taylor write the following in "Everyday Achievements? Literature, Philosophy and Criticism in the Work of Stanley Cavell" (2011):

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[30] Richard Eldridge and Bernad Rhie, "Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," p. 3.
[31] Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life and Modernity*, Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism and the Arts, ed. Lydia Goehr and Gregory M. Horowitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 24–25.
[32] Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 93.
[33] J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 78.

> There is a necessary tendency in Cavell's work […] to imagine criticism as carried out with others, in the presence of others, for it to be the scene of self-enquiry rather than an opportunity for displays of mastery. […] Criticism of this sort is to be found instead in the 'scenes of instruction' to which Cavell repeatedly returns in his own writing – those encounters exemplifies by the music lesson, the rehearsal and the seminar, those places where attunements are found or made, our competence and intelligibility challenged, tested or confirmed. Here, 'we are all teachers and all students' (*TCR* 352).[34]

This feature in Cavell is also something I think should be related to New Criticism. There is a significant resonance between such Cavellian scenes of instruction and the emphasis in New Criticism on a teachable, practical, criticism where both teachers and students alike share the burden of showing – through close reading – that the meaning one claims to see in a poem can be seen not just by me but by *us*. These are situations where attunement and intelligibility, as Loxley and Taylor write, are "challenged, tested or confirmed."

The comparison between Cavell's view on criticism and philosophy on the one hand and the body of work referred to as New Criticism on the other could be justified by the fact that Cavell himself has acknowledged the significance that New Criticism has had in the shaping of his own ideas. For instance, in his "Responses" to the essays in *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (2005), Cavell writes:

> I criticize the New Criticism, especially for its shunning of philosophy, yet I would not have found my path without having read Kenneth Burke and William Empson and R. P. Blackmur when they were on fire; I criticize logical positivism's treatment or stylization of human experience, yet I would not have reached the Wittgenstein I care about (or the Austin) without studying positivism when it was the philosophical avant-garde.[35]

However, before I turn to the final section of this introduction, I would like to make plain that my aim in this study is not to establish any genetic relation between the New Critics and Cavell (even if such a project were possible). My interest rather lies in how New Criticism, when compared with Cavell – through an intricate combination of differences and similarities – can help to make visible in greater detail both what interpretive skepticism is, how it can take root in our reflections on interpretation, as well as how it might be successfully challenged and overcome.

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[34] James Loxley and Andrew Taylor, "Everyday Achievements? Literature, Philosophy and Criticism in the Work of Stanley Cavell," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, pp. 12–13.
[35] Stanley Cavell, "Responses," *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p. 175.

The Structure of the Book

Part I (Chapter 1–3)

Chapter 1: If we are to get a clearer understanding of what *interpretive skepticism* is then it seems as if we do not only need to know what we mean when we talk about *skepticism*, but also what we mean by *literary interpretation*. Therefore the goal of the first chapter will be to clarify what kind of interpretive activities, as well as what sort of theorizing about interpretation, I consider vulnerable to interpretive skepticism. Furthermore, though I claim that modern theorizing about interpretation involves hidden or invisible skepticism, this does not mean that interpretive theory and literary hermeneutics are not abound with various articulations of doubt – that is, doubt which occasionally is described as being precisely skeptical, or at the very least as posing skeptical threats to interpretive practice. In this chapter I will therefore exemplify some such expressions of doubt in literary theory and hermeneutics. I will do this in order to show that it is not at all obvious which forms of doubt befalling literary interpretation can be adjudged "skeptical" – not even among those which, by some theorists, are labeled *as* "skeptical". Is it skeptical to deny that there is a single right interpretation, or is it on the contrary skeptical to deny that there can be more than one? Is being "against interpretation" the same as being skeptical of interpretation? Is being "against theory" the same as being a skeptic about interpretive theory? Is hermeneutics of suspicion a skeptical hermeneutics? These are the kind of questions I will articulate in the first chapter.

Chapter 2: If I am to answer such questions, however, I must first get a clearer view of the concept of skepticism itself. In chapter 2, I will thus turn to Cavell's analysis of skepticism. One important thing to stress here is that Cavell does not only say that there is something like "a truth in skepticism" (without implying that skepticism is *true*), he makes the further claim that even though the skeptic is not articulating the problem in a fully satisfying way – on the contrary, the skeptic is only imagining him- or herself to be fully intelligible when voicing the skeptical "doubt" – it is a predicament that he or she shares with the epistemologist who tries to disprove the skeptic, so to speak, head on. The epistemologist who aims to refute the skeptic turns out to be a *skeptical twin*, that is, someone who shares with the skeptic the philosophically confused, and essentially skeptical, way of articulating the problem of knowledge. Therefore in this second chapter I will focus on those concepts that I find most valuable in developing my analytical model of interpretive skepticism. These are first and foremost grammatical (or Wittgensteinian) criteria vs. expertise (or Austinian) criteria, the role and nature of authority in saying what something means, projective imagination and what it is to project and understand a word in a new context. With these ideas established I will then take a look at meaning skepticism more specifi-

cally, since it would appear that this mode of skeptical thought might be the most relevant kind in understanding interpretive skepticism. This will be achieved through providing a reading of James Conant's paper "The Varieties of Skepticism"; Conant will further help me to distinguish two varieties, or levels, of skeptical reasoning: namely Cartesian and Kantian skepticism. These two, as I see them, constitute logical *stages* of the skeptical problematic and will be essential for my general understanding, and subsequent discussions of the nature of interpretive skepticism.

Chapter 3: Having introduced Cavell's analysis of skepticism it is time to return to some of the theoretical problems of interpretation which I discussed in chapter 1. I will initiate my analysis of interpretive skepticism through a discussion of the work that has been conducted on this theme within the field of literary theory, specifically the studies by Talbot Taylor and Michael Fischer's on skepticism. In this context I will argue that something I call the "standard picture" of interpretive skepticism is too limited to encompass the skeptical problematic in interpretive theory. According to this picture, the interpretive skeptic is someone who *doubts* or *denies* that we can separate valid interpretations from invalid ones. However, I claim that both the interpretive realist (for whom the standard picture expresses a genuine skeptical threat) as well as the interpretive relativist (for whom this picture does not constitute a skeptical threat) can be regarded as interpretive skeptics. While the interpretive realist conceives the skeptical threat to operate on the level of Cartesian skeptical doubt, the interpretive relativist is meanwhile battling against a skeptical threat on Kantian terrain. I will thus argue that the realist and relativist, both of whom understand themselves as *opposing* skepticism (at least in the forms they conceive it), may be *skeptical twins*. In my analysis, interpretive skepticism has both a Cartesian and a Kantian variety. Whereas the Cartesian variant significantly tends to take root with a specific interpretive "hard case" of interpretation, and then grows into a general doubt (if we do not know how to interpret *this* poem, how do we know that we know how to interpret in general?), the Kantian variant is preoccupied with questions about how and whether we know the criteria of literary interpretation, that is, whether we are masters of the concept of literary interpretation in the first place. Having presented my own elaborated analysis of interpretive skepticism, I will show that this particular skeptical problematic not only cuts through the realism/relativism divide, but also through other traditional problems in literary theory, such as the debate over singularism vs. multiplism, the question of what the correct criteria of validity are, whether it is the author, the text or the reader (community) that is the constitutive site of literary meaning, and where the limits between valid interpretation and overinterpretation are locatable. I will also argue that we need to be sensitive to the different forms of interpretive *authority* we can appeal to when engaged in interpretation. One source of theoretical confusion lay in

our failure to separate our grammatical/Wittgensteinian authority from our expertise/Austinian authority when we are making interpretive claims.

Part II (Chapter 4–7)

Chapter 4: The second part of the book will investigate how interpretive skepticism can be found within a specific critical tradition. To this end, Chapter four introduces the case of New Criticism. Here I intend to show that New Criticism's focus on the ontology (and epistemology) of the literary work was, partially at least, motivated by the identification of a skeptical threat facing literary criticism on two fronts. If criticism is to be possible at all critics should be able to know the meaning of literature. But with the rise of modernist literature – not least modernist poetry – knowledge and certainty proved to be, often, highly difficult to attain. Modernist literature was not only harder to understand in a new way, but was itself a challenge to, as well an investigation into, the limits and possibilities of literary meaning. This made the question of what it means to understand literature a natural topic for the New Critics. Furthermore, as criticism was striving to live up to the standards of academic rigor, influential theories on language and meaning were at the same time rendering poetic meaning doubtful. From the sides of both theory and literature then, doubts regarding the meaningfulness of literature were raised which were, I argue, formative in shaping the sorts of questions New Criticism felt to be urgent in contributing theoretically to a rethinking of the possibility of criticism.

Chapter 5: How the very project of trying to prove and secure the possibility of criticism makes Monroe C. Beardsley an interpretive skeptic, is the subject of chapter 5. More specifically, in this chapter I argue that, on the one hand, Beardsley becomes a *skeptical twin* about interpretation in general, and a *straightforward skeptic* about literary, authorial, intentions on the other. Beardsley's anti-intentionalist interpretive theory is to a large extent motivated by what he conceives as the *skeptical threat of relativism*. Starting on the Cartesian level of the skeptical problematic Beardsley tries to give a general account of how to sort true from false interpretations. This question ultimately pushes Beardsley into a Kantian problematic about the conditions and criteria of literary interpretation. Unwittingly, Beardsley becomes a skeptical twin about interpretation in his effort to define the literary object, its conditions of meaningfulness, the criteria of validity in interpretation, and what it is to interpret correctly. In this chapter I also bring out Cavell's critique of Beardsley's anti-intentionalism in order to show how "The Intentional Fallacy" constitutes a *literary version of other-minds skepticism*. Furthermore, by comparing Beardsley's skeptical with Cavell's non-skeptical theorizing on an interpretive "hard case," as well as on the possibility of overinterpretation, I hope to show how it is possible to theorize on interpre-

tation in ways that acknowledge what one could call "the truth of interpretive skepticism," without becoming an interpretive skeptic.

Chapter 6: If Beardsley's main concern is to protect academic *criticism* against skeptical charges and thus to theoretically defend the possibility of validity in interpretation, Cleanth Brooks's main concern is to protect *poetry* against skeptical onslaught. For Brooks the skeptical threat against poetry presents itself as the charge of *nonsensicality*, and it is articulated both among readers and critics of modernist literature as well as among literary theorists. This problematic should be seen, I argue, in light of Cavell's discussion of the problem of "fraudulence" in modernist art and art-criticism. If the problem of fraudulence is the problem of how we know whether something is truly art or not, the (as I call it) *aesthetic skepticism* related to this problematic faces Brooks in the form of *poetic skepticism.* Expressions of poetic skepticism can be found both in reactions to modernist poetry and certain theoretical conceptions of meaning that Brooks responds to and opposes. The first threat faces Brooks through the literary critic Max Eastman's charge that modernist poetry is only seemingly meaningful. In the context of the problem of fraudulence, I furthermore argue that there are some interesting affinities between Cavell's philosophical response to demands of proof in criticism and the proposed practical procedure of a *close reading*. Secondly, Brooks also faces poetic skepticism in the form of a theoretical demand that poetry should be possible to paraphrase into clear *statements* in order to be truly meaningful. In "The Heresy of Paraphrase" Brooks opposes what he considers to be the unsound theoretical requirement of paraphrasability of poems: a requirement linked to the idea that the core meaning of poems are the interpretive statements we can make about their "content." However, Brooks's attempt to save the meaningfulness of poetry comes at the price of his own interpretive skepticism. This is, I argue, also what Cavell's critique of Brooks boils down to. Even if Cavell never calls Brooks an interpretive skeptic, this is ultimately the thrust of Cavell's criticism. Furthermore, I will show how Brooks's effort to save the meaningfulness of poetry by presenting a theory which supposedly explains and protects its special *kind* of meaningfulness – poetry as being written in the (unparaphrasable) "language of paradox" – turns him into a *skeptical twin* about the meaningfulness of poetry. However, having thus far aligned myself with, and elicited, Cavell's critique of Brooks in light of my own model of interpretive skepticism, I nonetheless end this chapter by challenging Cavell's critique and suggest an alternative interpretation of how we can read Brooks' critique of the heresy of paraphrase, and his defense of poetry, in a non-skeptical way.

Chapter 7: Up to this point, the interpretive skepticism I have discussed has concerned theorizing on interpretation in a rather strict and straightforward sense. It has concerned modes of theorizing which focus on the criteria, validity and nature of literary interpretation as such. However, many of the most influential theories we use while interpreting literature are not of this

kind. More often, when we speak of "Theory" or "theories" in interpretation, we think of such "big theories" as Marxist, or Freudian, or Feminist theories, which inform interpretive work. In the final chapter I thus turn to how such "big theories" in interpretation can relate to a skeptical problematic. I will here explicate how I think a "return to the rough ground of interpretation" can be a fruitful response to the problem of interpretive skepticism through a discussion of Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1964).[36] I will claim that such a return neither necessitates being "against interpretation" nor "against theories" (big or small). Nor does it involve an idealization of everyday interpretive practice, as if these never caused us theoretical problems. To return to the rough ground of interpretation is not to "ban" theorizing from interpretive practice. I will here discuss what I take to be "the difficulty of interpretation," a difficulty which may tempt us to make our escape to big theories, in light of Cora Diamond's article "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy" (2003).[37] What is it about the conditions of interpretation that, to speak with Diamond, occasionally *wound* us? How can interpretations both bring us together *and* isolate us; how can they reveal something about our human separateness? And lastly, how is this separateness something we may wish to overcome and deny by violent and authoritarian appeals to big theories in interpretation? By linking these questions to the hermeneutics of suspicion, as discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in terms of paranoid readings, this study will end by acknowledging the dual validity and necessity of readerly paranoia and trust.[38]

[36] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," (1964), *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), pp. 3–14.
[37] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy" (2003), in *Reading Cavell*, eds. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 98–118.
[38] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 123–151.

Chapter 1: Literary Interpretation, Interpretive Theory, and Doubt

Since the major argument of this book is that there are hidden or unacknowledged forms of skepticism in modern theoretical debates and discussions about literary interpretation, three things will need to be addressed and clarified in this chapter before I can, in chapter 2, turn to the notion of skepticism itself, and then to the specific features of interpretive skepticism in chapter 3.

First, what kind of interpretive theories, debates and problems am I referring to when I speak of a hidden skepticism in literary theory? I will begin this chapter by outlining some well-known topics and difficulties within literary interpretive theory, which, while focusing on other issues, may contain skeptical ways of formulating these very problems. Moreover, though I claim that there are *hidden* forms of skepticism in interpretive theory, it is hardly the case that literary theory and hermeneutics are devoid of various forms of *explicit* articulations of doubt. These doubts are sometimes described with a direct reference to a perceived *skeptical* problematic. I will therefore also present a handful of such articulations of doubt that can be regarded as candidates for interpretive skepticism.

Secondly, I will argue that among these, it is far from obvious what theoretical positions, sets of problems, or suspicions actually are "skeptical." Is it clear that those who speak of a perceived "skepticism" or skeptical threat in interpretive practice mean the same thing? Is it even satisfyingly clear *what* they mean (whether taken together or individually) by "skepticism"? Can one furthermore be sure that other problems *not* described as skeptical have immunity from skepticism?

Thirdly, I will make some remarks regarding what conception and practices I will have in mind as I talk about "literary interpretation" in this study. If interpretive skepticism is to be analyzed, then the reader should have at least a rough idea of what I take the phenomenon of "literary interpretation," subjected as it is to such skeptical theorizing, to be. In the final part of this chapter I will therefore give some hopefully illuminating comments on what, in the context of this investigation, I mean by "literary interpretation."

1.1. Problems and Debates in Interpretive Theory

1.1.1. Hermeneutics: Hermeneutical Theory and Philosophical Hermeneutics

What is interpretation? What is the nature of its validity? How do we separate good interpretations from poor ones? Questions like these have accompanied hermeneutics since its beginning, when it was engaged in the study of religious Scripture and texts from antiquity. In Biblical studies and theology, in philology, historiography, philosophy, legal and literary studies, anthropology, political studies and sociology, cultural studies, critical theory – more or less everywhere where human understanding is under investigation, questions about the nature and limits of interpretation are commonly raised. The term "hermeneutics" originates from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means to interpret or to translate, and at its broadest one could say that hermeneutics is "the theory and practice of interpretation."[39] It is difficult to find a definition of hermeneutics that at one and the same time is sufficiently succinct and extensive enough to apply to the wide spectra of hermeneutical traditions and activities that have developed throughout history and across disciplines. In *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* (2006) Timothy Clark gives the following definition: "Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation: of what it is to interpret a text and of how that interpretation may validate itself."[40] This is a wide and perhaps not very detailed definition, but then again, it is easy to agree with Joel Weinsheimer when he says that

> [h]ermeneutics has persisted in part because it is so protean and polymorphous that if repressed in one form it returns in another. The defect of this virtue is that hermeneutics is, logically speaking, indeterminate and amorphous. "Nothing is definable that has a history," Nietzsche somewhere remarks. Hermeneutics has meant so many things over the last two decades, not to mention the last two centuries, or the last two millennia, that any definition must be either vague, partial, or misleading.[41]

[39] Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 1. See also Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge: William B. Eerdsmans Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 1–6, Antony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge: William B. Eerdsmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 1–5.

[40] Timothy Clark, "Interpretation: Hermeneutics," *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Patricia Waugh (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 59.

[41] Joel Weinsheimer, "Foreword," in Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, transl. Martha Woodmansee, The Cambridge Literature, Culture, Theory Series, eds. Richard Macksey and Michael Sprinker (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. xiii.

Beyond the difficulty of finding a more general definition, in a literary context the term "hermeneutics" is often especially associated with the phenomenological hermeneutical tradition of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur.[42] Though both Gadamer and Ricœur will figure in this chapter, I intend not to delimit the term hermeneutics in such a way here. One gets a third, and a little more comprehensive, definition in Antony C. Thiselton's *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (2009). It reads as follows:

> [W]hereas *exegesis and interpretation* denote the *actual process* of interpreting texts, *hermeneutics* also includes the second-order discipline of asking critically *what exactly we are doing when we read, understand, or apply* texts. Hermeneutics explores *the conditions and criteria* that operate to try to ensure responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretation.[43]

Since my interest lies in how some specific contemporary theoretical problems and debates regarding literary interpretation can contain hidden skepticism, I will not linger on wider cross-disciplinary hermeneutical considerations or problems, nor will it be necessary for my purposes to dwell upon the history of hermeneutics. However, Thiselton's definition offers me an occasion to make a short historical detour in order to pick up a distinction *within* hermeneutics I find useful for the analysis of interpretive skepticism. It is probably fair to say that hermeneutics (more widely considered) includes both the practice of exegesis and interpretation on the one hand, *and* "the second-order" activity of asking critical questions about the conditions and criteria of interpretation," on the other. But by linking this second philosophical or theoretical approach to the third task of "*ensur[ing]* responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretation" (my italics), Thiselton is in fact describing what is often called *hermeneutical theory*. Hermeneutical theory is one strand of hermeneutics, different from *hermeneutic philosophy* (also called *philosophical hermeneutics*) and *critical hermeneutics*.[44] For my purposes, though, the most interesting and relevant distinction to make here is between hermeneutical theory and philosophical hermeneutics. This is because, in my view, it is within the strand of literary theory that derives from, or resembles, hermeneutical theory (rather than philosophical hermeneutics) that interpretive skepticism is most likely be found. Let me therefore briefly describe this difference through a short excursus on the relative differences that separate out the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey on the one hand, and the hermeneutical work of Gadamer on the other.

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[42] As Clark also points out in Clark, "Interpretation: Hermeneutics," p. 59.
[43] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, p. 4.
[44] See for instance Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London, Boston, Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1980), pp. 1–5, and Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, pp. 25–30.

Up until about the nineteenth century hermeneutics was more or less equivalent to the exegesis, philology and commentary of canonical texts. It was predominantly discipline-bound and concerned mainly with ascertaining the rules and procedures adequate for, say, Christian interpretations of Scripture, or the rabbinic Midrash and comments on the Torah, or ancient Greek interpretation of Homer. However, with the German Protestant theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the practical and methodological exegetical concerns of hermeneutics came to be more distinctly linked to epistemology in what now can be conceived of as *hermeneutical theory*. In *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (1980), Josef Bleicher writes that "[t]he first approach in the history of hermeneutics that attempted to inject epistemological considerations into methodological discussion is that of Schleiermacher."[45] With Schleiermacher hermeneutics was no longer just a methodological enterprise, concerned with constructing interpretive rules for specific sets of difficult texts. It became a *general theory of understanding* upon which interpretive methods and rules could be founded.[46] Before Schleiermacher, hermeneutics construed rules in order to promote correct understanding. However, those rules and methodological advancements were designed for special and tricky cases. Normally, human understanding was considered to work just fine. Hermeneutics was required to redeem an (exceptional) *lack of understanding*. With Schleiermacher the task of the hermeneuticist shifted. As Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson write in *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (2011): "Schleiermacher's assumption is not that we understand as a matter of course, but that there is usually an existing misunderstanding or foreignness that we must strive to overcome."[47] According to Schleiermacher a general hermeneutical theory was needed, not to redeem a *lack* of understanding, but in order to *avoid misunderstanding.* With the premium that the natural sciences were placing on exactitude

[45] Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, p. 13. However, for instance Peter Szondi has contested Schleiermacher's role as constituting a radical change in hermeneutics on this point. According to Szondi, Dilthey's essay "The Development of Hermeneutics" from 1900 has greatly influenced our view of the modern history of hermeneutics – a view which fails to do justice to the achievements of the hermeneutics of the Enlightenment, Szondi claims. See ch. 8 in Peter Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*. Szondi also points out that Johann Martin Chladenius (1710–1759) "goes beyond traditional hermeneuticists, who had dedicated themselves to the Scriptures or the *corpus juris* or the writings of antiquity. He rejects traditional hermeneutic specialization in favor of a general theory of interpretation, something that had not existed before the eighteenth century." Szondi, *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, p. 16.

[46] "[A]fter Schleiermacher, hermeneutics became an epistemological and theoretical and no longer a merely methodological and practical endeavor." Roy J. Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Current Theories of Understanding* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982), p. 11.

[47] Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory*, p. 30.

and rigor this was an especial risk that now appeared permanent.[48] Understanding correctly then, meant for Schleiermacher to understand the *author* – even to understand the author better than he understood himself.[49] It was by operating within the famous "hermeneutical circle" that such understanding was to take place. For Schleiermacher "[o]ne must already know a man in order to understand what he says, and yet one first becomes acquainted with him by what he says."[50] By reconstructing the historical situation of the author, through the dialectical relation between the parts and the whole of the text, the interpreter could aspire to valid knowledge about what the text truly meant. There was no real endpoint to this process; for Schleiermacher there is no such thing as *complete* hermeneutical understanding.[51]

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics belongs to *hermeneutical theory* since it asks fundamental questions about the conditions of interpretive understanding *in order to* produce adequate *methods for* interpretation. To speak with Thiselton, it is ultimately to "ensure responsible, valid, fruitful, or appropriate interpretation" – i.e. to *avoid misunderstanding* in the interpretive practice – that meta-questions about the conditions that make any interpretation possible have to be posed. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) continued this path of hermeneutic theory. As is well-known, Dilthey, inspired by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), wanted to found the human sciences, or the *Geisteswissenschaften*, on a hermeneutics of historical knowledge. From the German histographer J. G. Droysen (1808-1884), he adopted the sharp distinction between the natural and human sciences; while the natural sciences are concerned with *erklären/to explain* natural phenomena, the epistemological goal of the historical sciences is *verstehen/to understand* human culture and its artifacts.[52] Since historical understanding in Dilthey's view is always based on interpretation, the fate of the *Geisteswissenschaften* lay with the validity one could find in interpretation as a means of attaining reliable knowledge. Hermeneutics, according to Dilthey, had thus

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[48] "'The more lax practice of the art of understanding,' declares Schleiermacher, 'proceeds on the assumption that understanding arises naturally… the more rigorous practice proceeds on the assumption that misunderstanding arises naturally, and that understanding must be intended and sought at each point.'," Schleiermacher, quoted in David E. Linge, "Editor's introduction," Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, transl. and ed. David E. Linge (1976) (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), p. xiii.

[49] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, p. 158. What it really means to do so depends, of course, not least upon what one takes "better" and "understand" to mean here. As Richard E. Burnett notes in his *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, this varies in Kant, Herder, Schleiermacher, just to mention a few. The question as to who introduced into hermeneutics this ideal in any systematic way is also debated. See Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe; 145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), pp. 199ff, and in particular note 295, p. 200.

[50] Schleiermacher quoted in Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, p. 155.

[51] Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, pp. 148–161. Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory,* pp. 7–8, pp. 24–33, pp. 1–4.

[52] Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics*, pp. 8–16.

> beyond its use in the business of interpretation, a second task which is indeed its main one: it is to counteract the constant irruption of romantic whim and sceptical subjectivity into the realm of history by laying the historical foundations of valid interpretation on which all certainty in history rests. Absorbed into the context of the epistemology, logic and methodology of the human studies the theory of interpretation becomes a vital link between philosophy and the historical disciplines, an essential part of the foundations of the studies of man.[53]

One of the central things that Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) opposed and distanced himself from with his *philosophical hermeneutics* was precisely this foundationalist aspect of hermeneutical theory identifiable in both Schleiermacher and Dilthey. In *Truth and Method* (1960), a main claim of Gadamer's is that scientific method is not necessarily the best way to attain valid understanding, knowledge and truth. In fact, according to Gadamer, the kind of knowledge and truth that is the most fundamental for us as knowing subjects is not gained in this way. With these sentiments, Gadamer sets out not to critique scientific method per se; rather what he sought to challenge was its uncontested status as the single most reliable way to reach true understanding. The Schleiermachian picture of human understanding as being under permanent risk of *mis*understanding, is something Gadamer saw as misunderstanding in turn the conditions of knowledge; a misunderstanding caused by a misguided infatuation with the advancement of modern science.

> [O]ur initial task must be to overcome the epistemological truncation by which the traditional "science of hermeneutics" has been absorbed into the idea of modern science. If we consider Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, for instance, we find his view of this discipline peculiarly restricted by the modern idea of science. […] Schleiermacher defined hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding. To exclude by controlled, methodological consideration whatever is alien and leads to misunderstanding – misunderstanding suggested to us by distance in time, change in linguistic usages, or in the meanings of words and modes of thinking – that is certainly far from an absurd description of hermeneutical endeavor. But the question also arises as to whether the phenomenon of understanding is defined appropriately when we say that to understand is to avoid misunderstanding. Is it not, in fact, the case that every misunderstanding presupposes a "deep common accord"?[54]

There are several important differences here to appreciate between Gadamer and Schleiermacher. First, unlike Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is not supposed to issue any determinate *method* of interpretation; only concerned with investigating the *condi-*

[53] Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, ed. and transl. H.P. Rickman (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 260. Also quoted in Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, pp. 4–5.
[54] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," (1966) *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 7.

tions of general human understanding, Gadamer had no interest in founding or regulating interpretation. According to his take on the phenomena of human understanding, no such general foundation is needed or *can* be given: every *mis*understanding *presupposes* a "deep common accord." It is only against the background of normal, unproblematic, understanding that misunderstandings can occur or even be intelligible at all.[55]

Furthermore, when it comes to what understanding supposedly *consists in* and how it comes about, Gadamer charges Schleiermacher and Dilthey with remaining in the thrall of the Cartesian picture of the knowing subject. For Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the goal was to, as far as possible, cleanse oneself from one's own perspectives, traditions and historical context in order to overcome the gap of history and culture and thus ultimately to reach objective knowledge. The "ideal interpreter" then becomes a contextually stripped ahistorical cogito who reincarnates the lived experience of the author and reconstructs his or her own self-understanding and intentions. Gadamer, however, who did not identify the true meaning of the text with the intentions of the author, considered the pre-understanding or "the prejudices" of the interpreter not as a distorting bias, but as a vital precondition for any understanding to take place at all:

> Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us.[56]

For Gadamer, the Cartesian picture of a knowing subject who, stripped of all context and history, "observes" the "object" "objectively" distorts the actual process by which we encumbered beings come to understand the "object" and the world that surrounds us. We are cultural beings constituted by our history, traditions, and conventions. This does not mean that we are "enclosed within a wall of prejudices," blocking us from any genuine encounters with what is different or alien.[57] Rather, the hermeneutical situation of understanding has a dialogical form. When we understand something alien and new, we change along with our understanding. For Gadamer, understanding a text truthfully and correctly neither means to understand it in the same way independent of time and cultural situation nor does it mean to

[55] "Misunderstanding and strangeness are not the first factors, so that avoiding misunderstanding can be regarded as the specific task of hermeneutics. Just the reverse is the case. Only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our owns experience in the world." Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," p. 15.
[56] Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," p. 9.
[57] Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," p. 9.

reproduce the intentions of the author. Gadamer saw understanding as operating instead by and through the "fusion of horizons," a way of thinking about understanding that, for Gadamer, did not conform to the picture of a ghost-like cogito trying to reincarnate an alien being.[58] In fusing horizons, the interpreter's horizon of understanding merges with the horizon of what is being interpreted – the horizon of the other in personal interaction, and the horizon of the text in the interpretation of literature.[59]

> Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of the text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history. […] Not occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well. […] It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all*.[60]

Present here is not only a difference in how to conceive the author's self-understanding in relation to the meaning of a text, but furthermore, and more importantly, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics distances itself from Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory regarding whether or not we need to state the criteria of valid interpretation theoretically *in advance*; whether we think that theory needs to *regulate* interpretive practice in order for us not to, in general, misinterpret. Gadamer did not think we need or can do any of these things.

1.1.2. Literary Theory and Contemporary Theoretical Debates about Interpretation

So what, in light of those contemporary debates and problems I claim may contain hidden skepticism in literary theory, is the importance and relevance of this development from *hermeneutical theory* to *philosophical hermeneutics*? To answer this question I must beg the reader's indulgence for needing to describe these debates and problems at some length before explicitly returning to the question of what is skeptical about them. I start by looking at how, in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (1991), Joel Weinsheimer suggests the following relation between method-oriented hermeneutical theory, philosophical hermeneutics, and literary theory:

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[58] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), transl. W. Glen-Doepel (1975), transl. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (London, New Dehli, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 317, pp. 401–406.
[59] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 380–383.
[60] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 307.

> Hermeneutics acquired a new conception of itself when, in Kantian fashion, Schleiermacher shifted its task from establishing practical guidelines for understanding to discovering the general conditions that make it possible to understand at all. Gadamer has completed this shift by making his hermeneutics specifically philosophical, distinguishing it from hermeneutic theory in the strict sense and therefore also from literary theory in so far as hermeneutic theory is part of it. If, as has recently been suggested, literary theory consists in the attempt to regulate interpretation by appeal to a general conception of literature and the interpretation of it, then Gadamer's hermeneutics is not theoretical. It is in fact anti-theoretical in one respect, for it explores how understanding occurs at all – not how it should be regulated in order to function more rigorously or effectively.[61]

It would of course be absurd to read Weinsheimer as here claiming that Gadamer has had no impact on literary theory. This is obviously untrue. So when Weinsheimer writes that "[i]f […] literary theory consists in the attempt to regulate interpretation by appeal to a general conception of literature and the interpretation of it, then Gadamer's hermeneutics is not theoretical," one should stress the word "if. For it all depends on how we are to understand the role and function of literary theory in the first place; *if* literary theory consists in an attempt to regulate interpretive practice by appeal to a general conception of literature, *then,* it is true (such) literary theory departs from Gadamer's hermeneutics. But as a general characterization of literary theory I think we should not accept Weinsheimer's description, even though, as a depiction of a specific *strand* of literary theory, one that shares *hermeneutical theory's* methodological ambitions, his definition is accurate. As an example of literary hermeneutics that *is* "theoretical" in this sense, Weinsheimer cites the literary theorist E.D. Hirsch. Hirsch and his intentionalist interpretive theory, is also a suitable place to start unpacking the types of problems and debates in literary theory I claim harbor traces of skepticism.

In 1967, E.D. Hirsch published his *Validity in Interpretation*. In the preface he clearly states his indebtedness to the hermeneutical theory of Dilthey as well as his intent to oppose what he conceives of as *hermeneutical skepticism*:

> This book has been conceived as a contribution to general hermeneutic theory with special emphasis on the problem of validity. The problem has been neglected in recent years largely because the very conception of absolutely valid interpretation has come to be regarded with profound skepticism. […] The wider implications of such hermeneutical skepticism are usually overlooked by its adherents. At stake ultimately is the right of *any* humanistic discipline to claim genuine knowledge. Since all humanistic studies, as Dilthey ob-

[61] Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, p. x.

> served, are founded upon the interpretations of texts, valid interpretation is crucial to the validity of all subsequent inferences in those studies.[62]

Several recurrent problems in contemporary interpretive theory find articulation in Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*. First one should note that the problem of *interpretive validity*, its nature and criteria, often stands at the center of these debates. What is interpretive validity? How can it be established? How do we separate valid interpretations from invalid ones? For Hirsch the most significant concept for establishing interpretive validity is "intention" and therewith one encounters an especially divisive issue surrounding literary interpretation, splitting the field between *intentionalists and anti-intentionalists*.

Hirsch argues that without deploying authorial meaning as the principal criterion by which interpretations are evaluated, "no interpretation can possibly correspond to *the* meaning of the text."[63] Since a single sequence of words can often yield several different interpretations, we need something stable against which these meanings can be tested. The "text itself" could not be *that* stable corrective; after all, it is precisely the text itself that opens up toward a diversity in meaning that needs to be held in check. We could by all means, Hirsch admits, choose something else – say, what we take "the best" meaning of a poem to be – as a critical standard. But were we to do so, not only would we risk further disputes among critics concerning which "the best" meaning would be, but we would also have a situation in which "the critic would be the author of the best meaning."[64] Authorial intention is therefore the "only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation."[65] It is the only interpretive goal having any kind of disciplinary methodological stability about it, according to Hirsch. He thus raises the question: without such a stable criterion, on what ground could we settle interpretive disputes and claim authority as teachers?[66]

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[62] E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. viii.
[63] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 5.
[64] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 5.
[65] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 5.
[66] "A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. […] One proof that the conventions of language can sponsor different meanings from the same sequence of words resides in the fact that interpreters can and do disagree. When these disagreements occur, how are they to be resolved? Under the theory of semantic autonomy they cannot be resolved, since the meaning is not what the author meant, but 'what a poem means to different sensitive readers.' One interpretation is as valid as another, so long as it is 'sensitive' or 'plausible.' Yet the teacher of literature who adheres to Eliot's theory is also by profession the preserver of a heritage and the conveyor of knowledge. On what ground does he claim that his 'reading' is more valid than of any pupil? On no very firm ground." Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 4. Other well-known defenders of different forms of *intentionalism* are P.D. Juhl, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, Jerrold Levinson, and Noël Carroll. See for instance: P.D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press,

The debate between intentionalists and anti-intentionalists concerns where to draw the line separating the *interiority from the exteriority* of the text. It belongs to the overarching tripartite *author-text-reader* conflict in interpretive theory in which the central source of disagreement is about *where* and *how* literary meaning is constituted. Hirsch's defense of authorial intention in interpretation was a direct response to the New Critical assault on intentional and biographical reading, as perhaps best exemplified in Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946). According to Wimsatt and Beardsley not only does the author's intention belong *outside* the text, the reader's response is said also not to be significant for the text's meaning. This view is in turn contested by reader-response theorists and neo-pragmatists. In his *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), Stanley Fish goes further than simply claiming that reader-communities constitute meanings of texts; he goes so far as to assert that a text *has* no meaning other than the one constructed through the very act of interpretation: "Indeed, the text as an entity independent of interpretation and (ideally) responsible for its career drops out and is replaced by the texts that emerge as the consequence of our interpretive activities."[67]

This brings me to another constellation of important theoretical issues that are waged in interpretive theory, what might be termed *the constructivist-relativist-realist* debate. From within this vast area of interpretive dispute, questioning takes the following form: Does interpretation, as the constructivists claim *create* meaning or (as attested to by realists) is interpretation responsible for the *discovery (or recovery)* of meaning? Or, from the purview of relativism, are we to say that meaning is *relative* to the interpretive standards and procedures employed? This debate is in turn often inextricably linked with the dispute that positions interpretive *monists/singularists* against. *pluralists/multiplists*.[68] It is to pose the question: is there only one correct interpretation of a literary work (singularism) or can there be many valid interpretations (multiplism)? In the anthology *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?* (2001) several essays tackle this question in various forms and from different standpoints. On the *singularist* side we have for instance

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1980); Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory" (1982), *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); Jerrold Levinson, "Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies," and Noël Carroll, "Andy Kaufman and the Philosophy of Interpretation," both in: *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?*, ed. Michael Krausz (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2002), pp. 309–318, pp. 319–344.

[67] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 13.

[68] Both these sets of terms are used. Michael Krausz argues for the terms singularism vs. multiplism instead of the more traditional opposition between monism and pluralism. See Michael Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons: Interpretation in Cultural Practices* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

David Novitz. He argues that a work cannot have contradictory properties. Therefore two interpretations that are logically incompatible cannot be both correct.[69] This, one could say, is the more traditional view. One finds both Hirsch and Beardsley taking up precisely such a position. While they disagree on the role attributable to authorial intention in ascertaining the meaning of a literary object, Hirsch and Beardsley nevertheless agree that if two interpretations are both correct then they must be logically compatible with one another. This is not to say that singularists deny the fact we usually end up with conflicting interpretations. We may sometimes, or even most of the time, be unable to judge which interpretation is most likely to be true or the text may be genuinely ambiguous. Two contemporary *multiplists* from the same volume are Joseph Margolis and Torsten Pettersson. Not only do both claim that several interpretations can be valid, but Margolis and Pettersson propose also that there can exist benign forms of conflicting and contradictory interpretations.[70] Margolis defends pluralism in art criticism by claiming that the meaning of artworks – as intentional and cultural objects – are inherently relative to the historical and cultural changes our own embedded understanding undergo. The highly contextualized way in which the artworks are received by us therefore allows for the co-existence of mutually exclusive interpretations.

Usually the dispute between singularists and multiplists is also organized around the precise *logical terms to be adopted in the evaluation of interpretive validity*. For example, are interpretations true/false, adequate/inadequate, plausible/implausible, admissible/inadmissible, good/bad, etc.? The singularist David Novitz defends *bivalence* in interpretation, meaning that interpretations can either be *true or false*.

> The precise properties that works possess independently of specific interpretations are, I argue, what interpretation in its primary and central sense seeks to uncover, and in this sense it is always the case that interpretations are either true or false and that there always is a single right interpretation. [71]

Novitz can here be said to exemplify a particular tendency within literary theory. One is likely to find defenders of bivalence among singularists, and the singularists in turn often harbor realist sympathies. Likewise among multiplists, one can expect to find other logical terms than truth/falsity for interpretive validity and assume that such alternatives are in turn to be found among relativists and constructivists. But such groupings are not necessary.

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[69] David Novitz, "Against Critical Pluralism," *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?*, pp. 101–121.
[70] See Torsten Pettersson, "The Literary Work as a Pliable Entity: Combining Realism and Pluralism," and Joseph Margolis, "One and Only One Correct Interpretation," both in *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?*, pp. 211–230, pp. 26–44 .
[71] Novitz, "Against Critical Pluralism," p. 104.

Torsten Pettersson labels himself both an interpretive realist *and* a pluralist, arguing for his pluralist realism by appealing to the ontological status of literary works. If the literary work is viewed as a *pliable* entity, then different, even logically incompatible, interpretations can be said not only to "bend" the work in different directions but that the work itself affords a multiplicity of readings. Incompatible interpretations can therefore be said to pick up real features of the work. Logically speaking, mutually exclusive interpretations can of course not be held at the same time, within the same interpretation, just like a rubber band cannot, at the same time, be shaped into a triangle and a circle. But since it can take both shapes there is no more a logical scandal in the fact that a text can lend itself to conflicting interpretations than there is in the fact that the rubber band can both have the shape of a circle and a triangle.[72]

All these debates of course have a bearing on, and are commonly prompted by, the question of how we should treat *conflicting interpretations*. If there is only one single right interpretation that is *true*, then that must mean that opposing interpretations are *false*. If there can be many true interpretations, or if interpretations ought not to be considered as true or false at all but as better or worse, or relative to different standards of validity, then interpretive conflicts must have another logical status.

Related to all these concerns is furthermore the question of *the limits of interpretation – the relation between interpretation and overinterpretation or mis-interpretations.* You do not need to be a realist, a singularist, or a proponent of interpretive bivalence to maintain that there is a palpable difference between *valid* and *invalid* interpretations. In *Interpretation Theory* (1976), Paul Ricœur writes: "[I]f it is true that there is always more than one way of constructing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. The text presents a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and scepticism."[73] Ricœur's position here is similar to the position that Umberto Eco takes up in his well-known debate with Jonathan Culler and Richard Rorty in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992).[74] In this book Eco expresses his view that "in the course of the last decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed."[75] If taken too far this tendency will, according to Eco, lead to a point where "interpretation has no criteria."[76] While Eco does not think we can define the positive criteria by which we single out good inter-

[72] The specific metaphor of the rubber band is mine, but the point and argument are Pettersson's. Pettersson, "The Literary Work as a Pliable Entity."
[73] Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 79.
[74] Umberto Eco, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, Christine Brook-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
[75] Umberto Eco, "Interpretation and History," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 23.
[76] Eco, "Interpretation and History," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 23.

pretations, he does nonetheless defend our capacity to separate the good from the bad: "if there are no rules that help to ascertain which interpretations are the 'best' ones, there is at least a rule for ascertaining which ones are 'bad'."[77] This distinction between interpretation and overinterpretation is something Eco cashes out as a difference between "interpreting and using a text."[78] For Rorty, however, responding to Eco, this "is a distinction we pragmatists do not wish to make. On our view, all anybody ever does with anything is use it."[79] In Rorty's view there is no substantial or principled difference between interpretation and overinterpretation:

> [A] text just has whatever coherence it happened to acquire during the last roll of the hermeneutic wheel, just as a lump of clay only has whatever coherence it happened to pick up at the last turn of the potter's wheel. So I should prefer to say that the coherence of the text is not something it has before it is described, any more than the dots had coherence before we connected them.[80]

Jonathan Culler, for his part, defends overinterpretation by saying that "interpretation is interesting only when it is extreme."[81] Culler also suggests that the exciting and interesting distinction is not so much between good and bad interpretations, as it is between traditional, reasonable, interpretations looking for broad consensus, on the one hand, and new, more radical interpretations, on the other: "Moderate interpretation, which articulates a consensus, […] is of little interest."[82] Moderate and sensible interpretation tries to capture the "intention of the text," to read the text as the text wants to be read. Against such interpretations, Culler places "overinterpretations," which try not to reconstruct the intention of the text but instead pose critical questions to it, asking "how it relates to other texts and to other practices; what it conceals or represses; what it advances or is complicitous with. Many of the most interesting forms of modern criticism ask not what the work has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted."[83] Such *suspicious* readings, which read against the grain of the text, bring me to a further set of doubts and questions in interpretive theory. I will discuss these in the following section.

[77] Umberto Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 52.
[78] Umberto Eco, "Between Author and Text," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 68.
[79] Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 93.
[80] Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," p. 97.
[81] Jonathan Culler, "In Defence of Overinterpretation," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 110.
[82] Culler, "In Defence of Overinterpretation," p. 110.
[83] Culler, "In Defence of Overinterpretation," p. 115.

1.1.3. The Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Suspicion of Hermeneutics

The distinction Culler makes between those interpretations which try to *reconstruct* the intention of the text and those that try to bring out what the text "conceals and represses," closely resembles a famous distinction made by Paul Ricœur. In *Freud and Philosophy* (1970) Ricœur describes what he takes to be two fundamental and opposing poles in modern hermeneutics: *hermeneutics of recovery* on the one hand and *hermeneutics of suspicion*, on the other.[84] He writes,

> According to the one pole, hermeneutics is understood as the manifestation and restoration of a meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation, or as is sometimes said, a kerygma; according to the other pole, it is understood as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion. […] Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.[85]

Restorative hermeneutics is guided by the aim of recollecting meaning. In Ricœur's description the dialectics within the hermeneutic circle of the restorative readers becomes something of an ongoing loop of leaps of faith: '"Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe' – such is its maxim; and its maxim is the 'hermeneutic circle' itself of believing and understanding."[86] In contrast to this restorative hermeneutics, Ricœur presents the three great "masters of suspicion": Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. What unites them, according to Ricœur, is that they "look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false' consciousness."[87] Following Descartes, they raise a kind of Cartesian doubt concerning the reliability of the mind's own self-description. However, Ricœur claims, one should not mistake these masters of suspicion for *skeptics*:

> They are, assuredly, three great "destroyers." But […] [a]ll three clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a "destructive" critique, but by the invention of an art of *interpreting*. […] Beginning with them, understanding is hermeneutics: henceforward, to seek meaning is no longer to spell out the consciousness of meaning, but to *decipher its expressions*.[88]

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[84] Ricœur uses the headings "Interpretations as Recollection of Meaning," and "Interpretation as Exercise of Suspicion," as he discusses these two different modes of interpretation. See Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, transl. Denis Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 28–36.
[85] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 27.
[86] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 28.
[87] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 33.
[88] Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 33.

Within the hermeneutics of suspicion the *real* meaning is never the *apparent* one – not the one you would get by *trusting* the text and its own self-understanding (the method adopted by a restorative hermeneutics). The only way to reach the *real* truth of the text is by breaking the code that ciphers it, to reverse thereby the ciphering process by bringing it to consciousness. Breaking the code and making what is latent manifest breaks the spell. In that sense all the masters of suspicion *begin* with doubt and distrust "the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering; all three, however, far from being detractors of 'consciousness,' aim at extending it."[89] Just like Descartes, their doubt works to rid us of deceptive illusions.

In this way, *the hermeneutics of suspicion* seems closer to Habermas's *critical hermeneutics* than to Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's *hermeneutical theory* and Gadamer's *hermeneutic philosophy*. Habermas's critical hermeneutics rejects what he conceives as the idealist assumptions of both perspectives: their universalist approach as well as their neglect of extra-linguistic aspects in hermeneutics. For Habermas it is important to point out that political power structures also shape the dialectical conditions of understanding.[90] In "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," Habermas criticizes what he thinks is Gadamer's over-confidence in the mutual intelligibility in language. Hermeneutic consciousness may perhaps manage unproblematic situations of normal everyday discourse, Habermas admits. But he claims that it proves inadequate when faced with "systematically distorted communication" in which speakers themselves cannot recognize their communicative failure; here "only an external observer notices that they misunderstand one another."[91] Like Ricœur, Habermas cites Freud in this context. Habermas takes Freud as offering a case where systematically distorted communication can be identified from the *outside* position of psychoanalysis. While the subject (patient) him- or herself may not realize the pathology of his or her discourse, psychoanalytic theory can bring out a hidden meaning unavailable to the hermeneutic consciousness of the speaker: "This understanding can acquire an explanatory function in the narrow sense only if the analysis of meaning does not rely solely on the skilled application of communicative competence but is guided by theoretical assumptions."[92]

As a kind of inversion of the hermeneutics of suspicion (as well as critical hermeneutics), Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" (1964) displays what could be called a *suspicion of hermeneutics*. Interpretations, Sontag argues,

[89] Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, p. 34.
[90] One can furthermore in Habermas see critical hermeneutics' affinities with the Frankfurt School's "Critical Theory" and a wider Marxist tradition. See Josef Bleicher, "Introduction," *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, pp. 1–5.
[91] Jürgen Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," in Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*, p. 191.
[92] Habermas, "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," p. 194.

replace the work with some abstract notion of its "content."[93] This is done in an act of violence and constitutes "the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world."[94] Under the pretext of wanting to reach their true meaning and to make them intelligible, interpretations end up *taming* works of art: "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.' It is to turn *the* world into *this* world. ('This world'! As if there were any other.)"[95] What Ricœur would call "hermeneutics of suspicion" is in Sontag's view only one variant of illegitimate interpretive non-readings of literature. It is especially interpretations guided by suspicious theories, such as Freudian interpretations, that Sontag deplores: "Those who reach for a Freudian interpretation […] are only expressing their lack of response to what is there […]. It is always the case that interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else."[96]

One finds a contemporary continuation of this suspicion toward interpretation (and theoretical interpretation) among the adherents to the practice of *surface reading*. The adherents of surface reading contrast their own critical activity with what they call *symptomatic reading*. Symptomatic or metaphorical reading "encompasses an interpretive method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses."[97] It is not hard to recognize Culler's defense of overinterpretation, or the hermeneutics of suspicion in general, in this characterization. In their "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (2009), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus paint a somewhat mocking picture of a self-acclaimed hero-critic who brings the hidden depths to the surface. The hero-critic battles to unveil unconscious workings of (untoward) desire, ideology or epistemology, often by means of some theory or master-code such as Marxism, Freudianism, Feminism, Post-Colonialism, etc. In Best and Marcus' estimation these suspicious readers are nevertheless surprisingly naïve in their tendency to *overestimate* the progressive or subversive power of exposure.[98] As an example of such a paradoxically naïve and suspicious hero-critic, Best and Marcus cite Fredric Jameson:

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[93] Susan Sontag, "On Style," (1965), *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), pp. 20–21.
[94] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 7.
[95] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 7.
[96] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 10. I will return to Sontag and discuss her more thoroughly in chapter 7.
[97] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations*, Vol. 108, No. 1 (Fall 2009), p. 3.
[98] "The assumption that domination can only do its work when veiled, which may once have sounded almost paranoid, now has a nostalgic, even utopian ring to it. Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet." Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," p. 2.

> For this kind of critic, freedom emerges from an agon with the ideological text. There is perhaps no stronger advocate for this position than the Jameson of *The Political Unconscious*, who posits the Marxist critic as heroic in his or her own right, wrestling to free the truth hidden in the depths of the text. […] In this sense, Jameson is not only doing what E.D. Hirsch called usurping the place of the author […]; he is also more daringly associating the power of the critic with that of the God of biblical hermeneutics, who can transcend the blinkered point of view of mankind.[99]

Symptomatic and suspicious readers like Jameson are thus not only overestimating their own heroism, according to Best and Marcus. Through their violent penetration of the text, by means of theory, these critics do not only threaten to make themselves the authors of the text. They furthermore try to assume a kind of God's-eye-view position from which nothing will be able to speak *against* what they see.[100]

1.2. So What Is Skeptical About All of This?

I have now, though hardly exhaustively, described some familiar and recurrent problems and debates in interpretive theory, all of which are related to different forms of articulations of *doubt* – sometimes even with direct reference to a perceived *skepticism*. The question that remains now is which of the aforementioned theoretical positions, problems or conceptions, should be deemed "skeptical"? There seems to be no real consensus on this. However, I think one can start to see a pattern regarding what most of those who have spoken of "skepticism" so far tend to have in mind.

Doubting the possibility of true *validity* in interpretation was described as *hermeneutical skepticism* by Hirsch. In a similar vein Ricœur stressed that not all interpretations are of *equal* validity; we should avoid both dogmatism and *skepticism* in interpretation. One can here add that for Gadamer, the idea that every new reading would simply "create" the meaning of the text, or that all interpretations are of equal reliability, is – if not skepticism – then at least something he calls "untenable hermeneutic nihilism."[101] Eco, finally,

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[99] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," p. 15.

[100] Surface readers are trying to resist this tendency – they want to *see* the text, not *see through* it in search of something else. As an example of such an attempt Marcus takes her own research on female friendship in Victorian novels. By "just reading" these novels Marcus wants to explore the theme of female friendship *as friendship* – not as a cover-up story for suppressed lesbian desire. Her view is that since so many critics have *assumed* that the friendship must signify something more interesting, something forbidden, they have missed the interesting exploration of female friendship that is actually *there*. They have not read the text but past it. Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," p. 12. See also Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[101] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 86.

claimed that though we may not have a positive account of what characterizes valid interpretations, we can still separate them from invalid ones: "*it is not true that everything goes*."[102] This gives me an opportunity to offer a first sketch about what at least some theorists seem to consider as interpretive skepticism, namely the denial of a stable distinction between valid and invalid interpretations. This impression is further compounded once one has considered the critique of Stanley Fish leveled by Gregory Currie, in his "Interpretation in Art":

> I rejected […] the idea that all interpretations are equally good. I am not aware that anyone has seriously defended such an extreme scepticism as this, though there are various attempts to relativize the notion of goodness of an interpretation. Stanley Fish argues that we cannot say that one or other interpretation of the work is good, or better, simpliciter, than another. Instead, we are to say that that goodness or betterness is always community-relative, and that what is a good interpretation in (or for) one critical community need not be in another […]. But Fish gives this idea a more radical twist when he suggests that it is not some set of facts about the community's 'problem situation' that determines the worth of an interpretation for that community: rather, good and bad in interpretation is simply determined by the decision, or at least the preference, of those in authority in that community. Thus, while Fish's theory is officially a relativistic rather than a sceptical one, its relativization of goodness in interpretation to something so arbitrary makes it seem very close to scepticism.[103]

However, this assemblage of different references to "skepticism" in relation to interpretation does not give much of an analysis of the phenomenon. There is also a great variety among those who have contributed to it, which makes it hard to see to what extent they share views on what this interpretive skepticism consists in. While Eco, Ricœur and Hirsch all seem to agree that a rejection of the distinction between valid and invalid interpretations would constitute a skeptical claim, neither Eco nor Ricœur are singularists. Hirsch, however, is a singularist intentionalist who holds the principle of bivalence. This alone would probably make Eco and Ricœur skeptics in Hirsch's eyes, since for Hirsch there is either *one* correct interpretation, or anything seems to go. Furthermore, Eco speaks of the "intention of the text" as a kind of interpretive corrective.[104] This is something Hirsch would never accept as the criterion of validity since, according to him, it was exactly the immanent capacity of texts to lend themselves to many *different* interpretations that caused the difficulty of assessing the true interpretation in the first place. Here the odd couple Fish and Hirsch would agree that *the text* alone cannot "be the location of the core of agreement by means of which we reject inter-

[102] Umberto Eco, "Reply," *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 144.
[103] Gregory Currie, "Interpretation In Art," *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 293–294.
[104] See for instance, Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts," p. 64.

pretations."[105] Furthermore, it is not necessarily so that constructivists and relativists (like Fish) could not come up with an account that explained and made stable (in their view) the distinction between valid and invalid interpretations.[106] So what is interpretive skepticism, then? So far I would say we have quite an array of alternatives on display. One could ask:

Is it skeptical…

- to deny or doubt that there is a single right interpretation? This would make interpretive *pluralists/multiplists* skeptical by default.
- to deny or doubt that there can be several valid interpretations? Given the fact that interpretive practice generally allows for both alternative and conflicting interpretations, would it not rather be skeptical to doubt the validity of the entire procedure of the practice? This would make *monism/singularism* skeptical by default.
- to question whether interpretations must either be true or false? Is the *denial of bivalence* skeptical?
- to deny or doubt that we can ever know what the author meant, or to claim that authorial intention is never significant for the interpretation of literary works? Then *anti-intentionalism* would be skeptical.
- to deny or doubt that literary works have valid meanings beyond what the author meant? Then (at least certain forms of) *intentionalism* would be skeptical.
- to claim that the meaning of literature varies with readers or reader-communities? Then interpretive *relativism* is skeptical.
- to claim that meaning is created through interpretation? Then *constructivism* is skeptical.
- to claim that there is no stable distinction between interpretation and over-/misinterpretation?
- to interpret *suspiciously* in Ricœur's sense, guided by big theories? Then the *hermeneutics of suspicion* is skeptical. (Though Ricœur denies this.)

[105] Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, p. 342. See also Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 4.
[106] Fish gives the following explanation as to why we can maintain a distinction between valid and invalid interpretations: "if, as I have argued, the text is always a function of interpretation, then the text cannot be the location of the core of agreement by means of which we reject interpretations. We seem to be at an impasse: on the one hand there would be seem to be no basis for labeling an interpretation unacceptable, but on the other hand we do it all the time. This, however, is an impasse only if we assume that the activity of interpretation is itself unconstrained; but in fact the shape of that activity is determined by the literary institution which at any one time will authorize only a finite number of interpretive strategies." Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, p. 342.

- to interpret for depth, or "metaphorically," as the surface readers call it?
- to interpret literature *at all*? (As Sontag seems to suggest.)

Now, in my view a crucial reason why it is so hard to answer these questions by singling out what should and should not be viewed as *interpretive skepticism* within these debates, is that we lack – also in those theorists who occasionally speak of skepticism – a clear account of what *skepticism* is. What a skeptical *problematic* is, what a skeptical *way of formulating a problem* is, what forms of doubt that are *skeptical* doubts. That is why I will in chapter 2 first consult and present the best analysis of skepticism I have encountered, namely that of Stanley Cavell; subsequently, in chapter 3, I will give my own analysis of how skepticism, and skeptical reasoning, has taken shape in the specific context of literary theory. I shall argue that it is not necessarily the *denial or doubt* of the validity/invalidity distinction, neither is it the denial or doubt of the "single right interpretation" thesis, nor for that matter is interpretive skepticism reducible to any of the specific questions referred to above. Rather, I understand the phenomenon of interpretive skepticism as the very effort to *define* literary interpretation and its criteria of validity *in advance* of any concrete act of interpretation; such a strategy is adopted in order to secure once and for all the validity of interpretive practice. This makes particular theoretical approaches to literary interpretation, such as those stemming from or resembling *hermeneutical theory*, prone to skeptical theorizing. This is something I will endeavor to show in chapter 3. But also, as I will argue in chapter 7, one can see skeptical tendencies in *dogmatic* forms of hermeneutics of suspicion. These categorizations should not be seen as defining strict boundaries, as depicting the exclusive *Heimat* of interpretive skepticism. I call upon them in order to pick out *tendencies*, that is, tendencies that are best borne in mind if we wish to avoid interpretive skepticism. However, before I turn to Cavell and skepticism itself, I would like to make a few remarks on the concept of literary interpretation and explain which interpretive practices I have, first and foremost, in mind while discussing literary interpretation.

1.3. The Concept of Literary Interpretation

The task of this section will seemingly place me in a dilemma. On the one hand I ought to be able to clarify what I mean by "literary interpretation," on the other hand, though, I claim that certain efforts to *define* literary interpretation is what constitutes interpretive skepticism. So how might I describe what I mean by literary interpretation without becoming a skeptic myself? This for me is falsely perceived as a dilemma, since what I will give here is not a *definition* of literary interpretation, and most certainly not one that

should regulate practice in any way. I would rather, following Cavell and Wittgenstein, say that what I offer in the following are some *grammatical reminders* surrounding the concept of literary interpretation and a few clarificatory comments about what kind of interpretations and interpretive activities I have in mind when discussing literary interpretation.[107]

First of all, I will be considering as "literary interpretation" that variety of interpretations that are sometimes called "semantic" interpretations. That is, interpretations which try to express the meaning(s) of a text, passage, theme, metaphor, or other literary item – in contrast to, for instance, the performative interpretations of actors, which I will not deal with at all.[108] Furthermore, I am not merely thinking of "interpretation" in terms of the interpretive process, such as when an interpreter reads and interprets but never articulates and shares his or her understanding of the literary work with others. Instead, I focus on the interpretive "products" that are the result of such interpretive processes, which are produced in order to articulate and communicate a certain interpretive understanding of a literary work or item. I am here predominantly thinking of written interpretations of the kind we see in written literary criticism and scholarship.

As for the concept of literary interpretation, it is fundamental, I take it, that interpretations are logically different from mere descriptions of something immediately understood. These categories are different in the sense that interpretations articulate an understanding that has required the achievement of interpretive *work*. If a meaning is immediately understood and stated, then that understanding and articulation does not constitute an interpretation. This is a common enough distinction in the literature on interpretation, testifying, I think, to the shared understanding we have regarding the concept of interpretation. Nonetheless, this distinction is variously articulated, and I would like to give a few examples in order to make clear what I mean and do not mean by it. In *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings. An Anthology* (2004), Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes cash out this difference in the following way: "An interpretation of a work is not the same as a description of it. […] An interpretation is a special kind of inference from a description of a work: it is one that explains the work."[109] I am here hesitant to underwrite both that interpretations, *qua* interpretations, are *inferences* from descriptions, and that they are *explanations* of the work. Certainly, some interpretations can proceed from the inferences

[107] What I take "grammatical reminders," as well as the significance of "logic" and grammar," to be in this context will become clearer in chapter 2.
[108] One finds this distinction in for instance, Jerrold Levinson, "Two Notions of Interpretation," *Interpretation and Its Boundaries*, eds. Arto Haapala and Ossi Naukkarinen (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999), pp. 2–21.
[109] Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes, *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings: An Anthology*, eds. Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes, Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 251.

of descriptions and some interpretations will doubtlessly take as their principal task to *explain* the work. (But then again one would need to clarify what one means by "explain" here; explain why the work was written the way it was through investigations of the biography or statements of the author; explain why it has an idiosyncratic narrative structure because it ironically mocks certain narrative conventions of its genre; explain the function of a certain motive in relation to an overall theme? etc.) In any case, I do not find either "explanation" or "inference from description," to capture what separates interpretations from descriptions of something immediately understood. One however gets closer to what I have in mind if one looks at the following quote from Gregory Currie:

> To interpret is to do something, and an interpretation is the result of interpreting. […] [T]he result of interpreting is the attribution of content or meaning to something. […] [But] there are ways of assigning meaning that do not count as interpreting, and those ways do not result in interpretation. […] [I]nterpreting is assigning meaning in a special way. What way? […] I do not interpret the literal meaning of your utterance when you speak to me in my native language, nor your gesture when I take someone else's word for its meaning, nor a coded message when I assign meaning on the basis of a rule or calculation that is applied mechanically. Interpretation requires some degree of thought rather than the operation of merely subpersonal level processes, as with understanding literal meaning. It requires judgement.[110]

Just like Currie, I think it is important to note that interpretations are the result of an interpretive effort. And though I would not use the term "literal meaning" here, or lay any theoretical weight on it, I agree that usually when we talk to others and understand them in our native language, we are not *interpreting* them. Understanding, which comes about immediately and effortlessly, is not an understanding preceded and produced by interpretation. We only interpret when we *need* to interpret – when something is not immediately clear – when understanding requires some *work*, some *thought*, and also some *judgment*, as Currie says. Or in the words of Jerrold Levinson: "Interpretation standardly presupposes the nonobviousness of what is being interpreted; if one simply and securely sees that X is F, if there is no question of choosing or deciding to do so, then remarking that X is F is not a matter of interpreting it."[111]

This furthermore means that interpretation, as requiring work and judgment, also requires some amount of *creativity*. While not siding either with the realist or the constructivists, I find Joel Weinsheimer's description of how the concept of interpretation comprises "two poles" both appealing and apt. Weinsheimer calls them "the pole of correctness" and "the pole of creativity." With the slight adjustment that I would rather call the first "the pole

[110] Currie, "Interpretation In Art," p. 291.
[111] Levinson, "Two Notions of Interpretation," p. 3.

of faithfulness" (since I do not think all valid interpretations are necessarily most fittingly described as "correct"), I do think this characteristic grasps an important logical feature of literary interpretation.[112] It is in light of these two poles that the following insight should not strike one as *paradoxical*:

> An interpretation as such is different from and yet also the same as what it interprets. Unless it is both, it is not an interpretation. If it is not (in some sense) the same as what it interprets, it is not an interpretation but a new text, unrelated to the first; and if it is not (in some sense) different, it is not an interpretation of the text but a copy of it[113]

This "being different and yet the same"-feature of interpretation, is, I think, also logically related to (what I see as) *the fact* that different interpretations can focus on, and ask different things of, the text – that, simply, there are different *kinds* of interpretations. Or to borrow a formulation from Robert Stecker, which I entirely underwrite: "(a) people interpret artworks with different aims; (b) such interpretation needs to be evaluated relative to that aim; (c) the aims of some interpretations permit, indeed require, them to be evaluated for truth and falsity, while the aims of others do not."[114] This means that while I do not side with any *-ism* here (neither with intentionalism, nor with anti-intentionalism), I acknowledge as a simple *fact* that within literary interpretive *practice* there exist what one could call intentionalist as well as non-intentionalist interpretations. These may or may not be guided by any *theoretical* stance towards *intentionalism* – but the important point is that they *need* not be. Interpretations that consider the author's relation to, and thoughts on, his or her own work to be relevant for interpretation, *exist*. Interpretations that do not consider these things *exist* too. Both can be perfectly valid and make perfect sense and, indeed, can provide interesting readings of texts. This means there are some readings that aim for the intentions of the author, and some interpretations in which the authorial intention is taken as simply irrelevant or perhaps even misleading. Regarding some readings it will not only make sense, but furthermore it will be more or less *inescapable* to ask whether the interpretation is *true* or not (even if I may not be able to finally judge this). If my interpretation aims at the "actual intention" of the author, it is what the author *really meant* that I want to capture, and nothing else.[115] Likewise, if I make a historical interpretation, which tries to

[112] Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, p. 87.
[113] Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, p. 87. Now it is the *apparent* paradoxicality of these characteristics of interpretation that feed, I claim, Brooks's skeptical reasoning in "The Heresy of Paraphrase": How can a paraphrase say *exactly the same* when it is at the same time *necessarily* not saying *exactly the same?* This problematic will be worked out in chapter 6.
[114] Robert Stecker, "Interpretation and the Ontology of Art," *Is There A Single Right Interpretation?*, p. 160.
[115] Though I should admit that I often find the talk of "intention" in these kinds of interpretations – interpretations which in various ways want to align themselves with, and investigate,

reconstruct how a contemporary audience most likely would have understood a certain literary work or item, then there might be historical data that render my interpretation most likely *false*. My interpretation could have relied on false facts, or on misconceptions of what certain words meant at a certain time, or of how certain topics were dealt with in a certain genre, or by a certain group of authors. However, the sort of standard cases of interpretation I have in mind will *not* be of this variety. Or perhaps I should rather say: they will not be *limited* to interpretations of this kind.

Here I find it helpful to draw upon a distinction made by Jerrold Levinson. Levinson distinguishes between two modes of interpretation, which are separated by the kind of question they pose to a text. The first mode, the *DM*-mode, as Levinson calls it, asks of a text "What *does* it mean?" The second mode, the *CM*-mode, asks instead "What *could* it mean?"[116] Now, while I do not follow Levinson in how he works out this distinction in all its details, I would say that the question "What can (or could) it mean?" will better single out the type of interpretations I have in mind when I speak of literary interpretation.[117] And this is because I think this type of interpretation is the *wider* category, under which the other modality can be subsumed. If, for example, I am interpreting a work in order to reconstruct what the author most likely meant by it, then if that interpretation is supposed to be a candidate for what the text *does* mean – and *in this particular case* one has decided that "does mean" signifies what the author *meant* – then the interpretation must certainly *also* capture what the text possibly *could* mean (in a less restricted sense). Simply put: a text cannot *really* mean (presupposing that we have given some specification of what we take "really" to mean in this context) something which the text *could not* mean. What it *does* mean has to be one of the *possible* things the text *could* mean.[118] So while I include interpretations in the *DM*-mode when I speak of "literary interpretations", I will generally have the *CM*-mode in mind. I will predominantly think of the interpretive task as the task of showing, or arguing for, how a presented interpretation can indeed *make sense of* a certain piece of literature. Or to speak

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what the author meant and how he or she thought about his or her own work – to be distortive. To describe such readings as essentially looking for the "intention" of the author often fails to capture what is really of interest for these interpreters through its one-sided focus on "intentions." Such descriptions also often have too much of an unnecessary ring of theory to them.

[116] See Levinson, "Two Notions of Interpretation."

[117] For example, I do not agree that the DM mode "presupposes, at least defeasibly, that there is a *single* answer to the question of an item's meaning or significance." Levinson, "Two Notions of Interpretation," p. 7. Nor do I underwrite the way in which Levinson develops and uses this distinction in the process of defending his "hypothetical intentionalism"-thesis later in the article. See Levinson, "Two Notions of Interpretation," pp. 13–18.

[118] Levinson puts it this way: "DM inquiry invariably involves a *phase or moment* of CM inquiry engaged in heuristically or instrumentally. That is, in the course of determinative inquiry one will invariably consider what an item *could* mean or signify, in the interest of turning up reasonable candidates for what the item *does* mean or signify." Levinson, "Two Notions of Interpretation," p. 7.

with Levinson, it is to show/argue/demonstrate how and why X can sensibly be seen, and should be seen, *as* F, when X does not immediately present itself as F.

By now a reader familiar with Wittgenstein may correctly surmise that I am here influenced by his discussion of *seeing-as,* as it is elaborated in terms of *aspect-seeing*. In the following passage from *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) I think that Cavell gives a very good description of how aspect-seeing, as a form of seeing-as, can shed light on the logic of interpretation:

> I pick up the suggestion from Wittgenstein's celebrated study, in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*, that what he calls "seeing an aspect" is the form of interpretation: it is seeing something *as* something. Two conditions hold of a case in which the concept of "seeing as" is correctly employed. There must be a competing way of seeing the phenomenon in question, something else to see it as (in Wittgenstein's most famous case, that of the Gestalt figure of the "duck-rabbit," it may be seen as a duck or as a rabbit); and a given person may not be able to see it both ways, in which case it will not be true for him that he sees it (that is, sees the duck or sees the rabbit) *as* anything (though it will be true to say of him, if said by us who see both possibilities, that he sees it as one or the other). And one aspect dawns not just as *a* way of seeing but as a way of seeing something now, a way that eclipses some other, definite way in which one can oneself see the "same" thing.[119]

I think that this way of describing some features of the logic of interpretation resembles the one Torsten Pettersson's conception of the literary work as a pliable entity expressed earlier. A Gestalt figure can be seen in alternative ways, but as long as we are seeing one aspect of it (say the rabbit) this way of seeing eclipses the other (the duck). I cannot see the figure *as* a rabbit and *at the same* time see it *as* a duck. Similarly, Pettersson argued that two conflicting interpretations could be faithful to the text, and be both valid, as long as the text can take the shape of both – but the text cannot take both shapes *at the same time*, within the same interpretation.

Choosing between these two heuristic pictures I prefer the picture of the aspect-shifts and the Gestalt-figure. But while I think that the comparison with aspect-shifts and aspect-seeing is helpful in conceptualizing "the pole of faithfulness" present in interpretation, this picture does not sufficiently help us to understand "the pole of creativity," or the interpretive *work* required by literary interpretation.[120] And it does not have to. The point here is

[119] Stanley Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 36.

[120] Cavell makes a similar observation in *The Claim of Reason*, part IV, where he writes: "Imagination is called for […] when I have to […] make a connection. […] 'Seeing something as something' is what Wittgenstein calls 'interpretation' […]. In looking more closely at this region of the *Investigations*, I do not want to become fixated with the duck-rabbit. It is a beautiful and clear example; but of what? Not of psychological subtleties; not of *all* cases of interpretation; in particular, not all of aesthetic experience." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 254. Cavell goes on to note that, for instance, it only allows for two different ways of reading it, that "no background of context is required (no imagination) against which to read it one

not to find a "perfect" picture, or definition of interpretation, capturing *all* possible important and relevant features. (Perfect for what purpose? For *all* purposes? For simply saying what interpretation *is?* Capturing all *possible* uses of the word? But *that* says *nothing* if I do not try to say anything with it!) As I already mentioned, and as will become more clear by chapter 3, the very idea that we would *need* such a definition in order to be able to *really* talk meaningfully about interpretation, is in my analysis a skeptical idea. My purpose in using different heuristic pictures and eliciting some logical features of interpretation is instead simply to make clear for the reader (or, perhaps, to remind him or her) the kind of phenomenon that I claim is presently suffering skeptical onslaught. Once again: it is not to present *the* definition of "literary interpretation."

My next step in the process of clarification would be to mix or complement the picture of the Gestalt figure and aspect-seeing with the following picture from Wolfgang Iser, when he describes the literary text and its interpretation: "The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable."[121] If one combines the picture of the Gestalt figure with Iser's picture of the drawing of lines between fixed dots (or stars), one gets, I think, a more comprehensive overview of interpretation: a picture that encompasses both the poles of faithfulness and creativity. One could then think of interpretation as the drawing of the lines between the dots of a Gestalt figure, or as the moving of one's finger (or pen) as one points out how the dots should be combined in order to create and make visible specific patterns: "*Here* you can see the shape of the ears, and if you follow this line down here we can see that *this* should be seen as the nose" (in the case where you show someone *the rabbit* in the duck-rabbit); or alternatively: "*This* should be seen as the beak, which means that the shape we get back here, *that*, should be seen as the back of the head" (when you demonstrate how one should relate the different parts of the picture so that it makes up a *duck*). But these pictures need not be fused into a unity, they work just as well as two different pictures, eliciting different aspects of interpretation, or different types of interpretive work.

Interpretation requires the capacity to faithfully *and* creatively see *patterns*, relations, ways to combine different features, of the text. Many interpretations also concern how these patterns can be related to, or be hooked up with, different things outside the text. Making out these patterns (in various ways) means *making sense* of the text (in equally manifold ways). However,

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way or the other," that the switching between the two alternatives is voluntary and reversible, etc. In short, the picture can be helpful as an object of comparison but its simplicity and beauty also sets limits to its applicability, so that not all forms of interpretations or logical features of interpretation are caught in it. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 354–355.

[121] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman Inc., 1988), p. 218.

not all approaches to such pattern-work will be judged to result in valid patterns. On this particular point I side with Eco against Rorty. The placing of the "dots" will set limits to what coherences we find, which *possible* ways we link features of the text together in a way that makes sense. Not every attempt will be acceptable. And though we may not know (I would even say "cannot know") in advance which attempts will work, some will be more effective than others. The literary text is not a lump of clay we can form into *any* shape we wish. As a consequence, if something is an interpretation it *must* also, logically speaking, leave room for alternative interpretations – if we are dealing with an interpretation at all. However, this does not mean that there always exists competing interpretations, or that these are of equal validity, interest, and value. But the concept of interpretation itself, through its character of *seeing-as*, logically requires *the possibility* of alternative ways of seeing the same thing. Thus, Cavell also notes: "saying that there must be others [other possible ways of interpreting] is correct enough but quite empty until a competing interpretation is suggested."[122]

But how then, the reader might still wonder, do my remarks here – clearly relying on conceptual investigations made by Cavell and Wittgenstein – actually differ from a theory of interpretation, or a theoretical definition of literary interpretation? I claim that I have not presented a theory and that my comments on interpretation first and foremost are supposed to be logical remarks and reminders about the concept of literary interpretation recognizable from interpretive practice. This means that to the extent that academic *interpreters of literature* do not recognize the concept of interpretation brought out through my remarks, the points I have made will lack authority. I do not mind calling these remarks "theoretical" in the sense that they express theoretical reflection upon a concept. But they do not constitute a theory of interpretation that tries to draw limits to what we can do in interpretive practices; the remarks are not articulated with the aim of construing a method we must follow in order to avoid misunderstanding. This also means that I consider the remarks on the logic of literary interpretation made above to have more in common with *philosophical hermeneutics* than with *hermeneutical theory*.[123]

In his *Philosophical Investigations* § 124, Wittgenstein writes: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is."[124] With those words, let me leave literary interpretation for a while and move on to Cavell's analysis of skepticism.

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[122] Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 36.
[123] I think there are several deep and interesting similarities to trace between Gadamer and Cavell on this point, but these will not be explored in the present study.
[124] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §124, p. 42e.

Chapter 2: Cavell on Skepticism

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on a whole we do is a matter of our sharing the same routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.[125]

> My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.[126]

> The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery.[127]

> Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement.[128]

2.1. Cavell's Reinterpretation of Skepticism

In the previous chapter I invoked the distinction within hermeneutics between hermeneutical theory and philosophical hermeneutics, and touched upon Gadamer's criticism of Schleiermacher's Cartesian view of the human subject. I also suggested that a literary theory inheriting the Schleiermacherian idea of the necessity of a method, in order to avoid misunderstanding (in

[125] Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 52.
[126] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 464, p. 113e.
[127] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §119, p. 41e.
[128] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty/Über Gewissheit*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, transl. Dennis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (1969) (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), §378, p 49e.

general), could be suspected of being more prone to interpretive skepticism than a literary theory inspired by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. This critique of the Cartesian tradition is a fitting juncture to turn attention to the specific contribution of Stanley Cavell, since Cavell's reinterpretation of skepticism is also a reinterpretation of modern philosophy and epistemology within the Cartesian tradition. Cavell's understanding of skepticism is comprised of readings of Shakespeare and Descartes, which are set against the backdrop of the teachings of Wittgenstein and Austin. In his introduction to *Disowning Knowledge*, a collection of essays on Shakespearean drama and skepticism, Cavell writes:

> My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare […]. [T]he skeptical problematic I have in mind is given its philosophical refinement in Descartes's way of raising the question of God's existence and of the immortality of the soul (I assume as, among other things, preparations for, or against, the credibility of the new science of the external world). The issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. […] If Shakespeare's plays interpret and reinterpret the skeptical problematic – the question whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it – it follows that the plays find no stable solution to skepticism, in particular no rest in what we know of God.[129]

Cavell contests Descartes's own understanding of the function of methodological skeptical doubt in relation to a presumed lack of a foundation of knowledge. The skeptical doubt in Descartes is introduced in order to annihilate doubt and to attain certainty. If Schleiermacher wanted to create a method of interpretation in order to avoid misunderstanding, Descartes wanted to create a philosophical method in order to avoid falsity and error in our pursuits of truth. Therefore, in his *Mediations*, he offers "reasons […] which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things, especially material things, so long as we have no foundations for the sciences other than those which we have had up till now."[130] The very point of this radical doubt "is to make it impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover to be true."[131] The quest for certainty and for an ultimate foundation of knowledge is self-professedly anti-skeptical in Descartes. Cavell, however, sees this project as part and parcel of the skeptical problem itself – it only represents the other side of the skeptical coin. This means that

[129] Cavell, "Introduction," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 3.
[130] René Descartes, "Synopsis of the Following Six Meditations," *Meditations of First Philosophy* (1641), in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes,* Vol. II, transl. John Cottingham, Douglas Murdoch, Robert Stoothoff (1984) (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 9.
[131] Descartes, "Synopsis of the Following Six Meditations," p. 9.

according to Cavell's understanding of skepticism, Descartes as an epistemologist becomes what I will call a *skeptical twin*.

> I do not, that is, confine the term [skepticism] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge. […] [I take] the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute skepticism, regardless of whether a philosophy takes itself to have *answered* the question affirmatively or negatively.[132]

The implications of this view – i.e. the view that both the anti-skeptical epistemologist and the straightforward skeptic accept a skeptical understanding of the problem of knowledge – will be immensely important not only for Cavell's reinterpretation of what constitutes a skeptic, but also for my own investigation of interpretive skepticism in chapter 3 and in the ensuing chapters.

Disappointingly for some, Cavell has rejected the idea that Wittgenstein could, or ever intended to, remove the threat of skepticism once and for all. He writes: "I wish […] to suggest that so far as the appeal to what we should ordinarily say is taken to provide an immediate repudiation of skepticism, that appeal is itself repudiated."[133] On the contrary, on Cavell's view Wittgenstein has revealed what Cavell calls "the truth in skepticism." This is not to say that skepticism is true. What it constitutes, though, is an acknowledgement "that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing."[134] On Cavell's Wittgensteinian reading, skepticism is and always will be a living temptation for any "creature complicated or burdened enough to possess language at all."[135] But even if there is something like a "truth in skepticism," this is a truth the skeptic misunderstands. The skeptic intellectualizes his or her own human predicament or finitude, and turns it into a problem concerning a supposed lack of knowledge or an absence of a foundation for knowledge. Cavell, in contrast, stresses (with, among others, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Kant) that "the limitations of knowledge are not failures of it."[136] It is as a contrast to this intellectualization of our relation to the world and to others, even to our intellectualization of knowledge as such, that Cavell turns to Shakespearean tragedy. Cavell thinks that in Shakespeare our anxiety of living in a groundless world, which skepticism intellectualizes, is returned to the flesh and blood of the human condition.

There are mainly three areas that Cavell investigates with regard to skepticism:

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[132] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 46.
[133] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 238.
[134] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 241.
[135] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 140.
[136] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 241.

- Skepticism concerning the external world
- Skepticism about other minds
- Meaning (or language) skepticism[137]

External-world skepticism revolves around the worry that the world might not be as it appears: How do we know that things around us are as they seem? What about this tomato? When I look at it do I ever see *all* of it? Is there not always a side (or the inside, or some further unreachable but essential dimension of the thing) that is hidden from my view? How do I know it is a real tomato, and not say, a very well made replica? If I cut it apart and taste its familiar flavour, is that a sufficient test of its realness? Have not my senses deceived me before, do we not make mistakes? In fact, what indubitable justification can we present for our senses actually *ever* telling us the truth? With what right do we believe that our senses are even adjusted to "fit" the world as it is? Descartes has famously articulated this kind of skeptical doubt while presenting his "dream argument":

> [A]lthough the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? […] A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as […] when awake – […] that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! […] Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars – that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands – are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all.[138]

Descartes's dream argument takes us as far as even questioning whether there *is* a world outside our own minds, and whether our minds can reach that world. Perhaps I am only dreaming, or maybe I am a brain in a vat?

Other-minds skepticism centers on questions of how and whether we ever can be sure about what others think or feel. How, for example, can I tell a *feigned* expression of pain from its real expression? All I seem to have access to are the outer physical movements and sounds of others, and never the raw horrible thing that might be hurting them inside. All they tell or show me seem not only filtered through their behavior, but also filtered through

[137] Actually I think he addresses a fourth kind as well – what I will call "aesthetic skepticism" – in his discussion of the problematic of *fraudulence* in art. I will return to Cavell's treatment of aesthetic skepticism in chapter 6 as I investigate the poetic skepticism against which Cleanth Brooks battles.

[138] Descartes, "First Meditation: What Can be Called into Doubt," *Meditations of First Philosophy*, pp. 12–13.

my mind and my own apprehensions; I never feel *their* pain, or *their* pleasure. There seems to be this unbreakable boundary we can never cross, keeping us apart, hedging our knowledge of each other, turning it into a proxy. In fact how do I even know that there are other minds, other fellow humans (rather than, for instance, automatons)? In the *Meditations* Descartes writes: "[I]f I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happened to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves […]. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons?"[139] Furthermore, if I am, say, a brain in a vat or if I am dreaming, then the people in my life are only figments of my own imagination.

In meaning skepticism the skeptic questions our reliance on *language*: how do we know that our language captures the true meaning of things? How can we actually "reach" the things outside of us, in the world, i.e. adequately "touch" them with our words? (This concern resembles the worry that our senses do not reach the things outside of us). The skeptic can also ask why we should trust language to accurately portray what is *in* our minds as well. Thoughts, feelings and sensations, how could such intimate "things" in our souls ever be externalised, recast into words, without losing some of their essential qualities? Could not language be like a distorting lens, obscuring everything we see through it, even blocking out certain things entirely from view? How do I know that you and I mean *the same* thing by the same words? Misunderstandings occur, so how do I know that I have understood your words, or a text? Could not what we both call "blue" signify different colours, with respect to how they are experienced by us? So that if I could *really* see what you see, I would perhaps call your blue, "green," and if you could get into my mind and see what I call "blue," you might see what you would call "red"? How do I even know that I, myself, mean the same thing with the same word on different occasions; could I not be tricked by my memory? Am I even in a position to tell whether I *ever* encounter something that could be called "the same"? Even this type of skeptical problematic is briefly touched upon by Descartes through his idea of an omnipotent deceiver, a "malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning" who takes it upon himself to confuse my thinking.[140] The deceiver could distort my memory and mess up my calculations, causing me to be mistaken about the most basic forms of arithmetic: "since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three [and get five] […] if that is imaginable?"[141]

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[139] Descartes, "Second Meditation: The Nature of the Human Mind, and How it is Better Known Than the Body," *Meditations of First Philosophy*, p. 21.
[140] Descartes, "First Meditation," p. 15.
[141] Descartes, "First Meditation," p. 14. See also "Third Meditation," p. 25. As I will demonstrate in 2.2.4., Kripke addresses the problem of meaning skepticism by means of the rule of

As the above enumeration of characteristics surrounding skepticism serves to show, one type of skeptical reasoning easily turns into another; if I am uncertain whether I can trust the testimony of my senses then surely not only the external world is hidden from or distorted for me but also the other people inhabiting it. Likewise, if I cannot trust language to convey the true meanings of things, say of what you mean when you call something "blue," then not only is *meaning* withdrawing from me, but also *you* and your inner life, as well as my own possibility to conceptualize, and think about, the external world: my capacity to cognitively "reach" it with my words disintegrates.

As I now turn to Cavell's treatment of these issues, I will do so bearing in mind what Stephen Mullhal writes in "On Refusing to Begin," namely that Cavell's "*The Claim of Reason* is, above or at least before all, a reading of the *Philosophical Investigations*, a response to that highly unusual text."[142] This intimate connection between Cavell's and Wittgenstein's thought will guide me throughout this book. This means that while I will not, for instance, invoke Cavell's references to Austin (which are important enough) in this or the ensuing chapters, I will nevertheless continuously quote Wittgenstein, and treat him as being expressive of Cavell's views and vice versa.

I will also, in this particular chapter, initially focus on Cavell's treatment of external-world skepticism. This means that in what follows the role Shakespeare plays for him will be somewhat downplayed since it is in particular with regard to other-minds skepticism that tragedy becomes essential.[143] Other-minds skepticism is not identical to external-world skepticism, the former has its own specific characteristics which I will not delve very much into in this chapter. I will return to other-minds skepticism, however, when it becomes relevant for my analysis of Beardsley's anti-intentionalism in chapter 5.

Instead, after having discussed Cavell's account of (what is more or less common to) the skeptical line of argument in external-world and other-minds skepticism in the first part of this chapter, 2.1, I will in 2.2 address the specificity of meaning skepticism by reading Cavell's account of it through James Conant's taxonomy of Cartesian and Kantian skepticism. Meaning skepticism is the form of skepticism that would appear to have most relevance for interpretive skepticism, and it will prove to be even more interesting in this regard once I have shown that at least in both James Conant's and Saul Kripke's explications of meaning skepticism, *interpretation* has a significant role.

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addition. I think that Descartes in fact could be seen as approaching that very problematic in the *Meditations* though I will not argue the point here.

[142] Stephen Mulhall, "On Refusing to Begin," *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p. 23.

[143] "[T]he form of tragedy is the public form of the life of skepticism with respect to other minds." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 478.

2.1.1. The Skeptical Argument: Questions of "*Being* so" vs. Questions of "Being *so*," Wittgensteinian and Austinian Criteria, Generic Objects and the Rejection of A Best Case of Knowledge

In order to analyze skepticism one must, Cavell thinks, reconstruct the skeptic's arguments, as well as his or her motivation for following those arguments through. Not all forms of doubt will lead to skepticism. So how must the skeptic proceed in order to generate a global doubt, possibly annihilating our trust in ourselves as knowing subjects? In other words: what is needed to get skepticism off the ground? In *The Claim of Reason* Cavell explicates the structure of this argument, in particular with regard to external-world skepticism, in terms of the rejection of *a best case of knowledge*.[144] What is a best case of knowledge, and what is the procedure by which such a best case is rejected?

A best case of knowledge is an example of something that supposedly everyone knows, which is called into question when experienced or observed under optimal conditions, i.e. conditions under which it would at first seem impossible to deny the knowledge claim in question. If a skeptic is successful in rejecting a piece of such knowledge, the doubt will expand globally through the logic of "If I do not know *this* then how can I know anything?" Which is to say, if the skeptic can induce doubt even in a *best* case of knowledge, a case we take to be exempt from all doubt, then *nothing* will seem safe from doubt anymore. What is required for a best case of knowledge to be a proper best case is the following:

First, there are at least two kinds of question the skeptic could ask with regard to our knowledge of something: (i) whether we know *what* that thing is – its *criteria of identity* – and (ii) whether we know that it *exists* (that it is true and real). These two questions are labeled by Cavell as questions of

[144] The following account will entail a substantial simplification of Cavell's analysis of skepticism which has to do with the fact that in order to work out my own model of interpretive skepticism, I will treat Cavell's analysis of external-world skepticism as more or less representative of his overall analysis of skepticism. This is because not all subtleties and complexities in his dealings with various forms of skepticism will be of relevance to my own investigation. I will not, for instance, here address the quite important differences Cavell traces between the procedures of external-world skepticism and other-minds skepticism with regard to best cases of knowledge vs. best cases of acknowledgement. Whereas Cavell considers both best cases of knowing objects and best cases of knowing, say, what others think and feel – e.g. the states they are in, what is in their minds, that they are in pain, etc. – he does not think a best case of knowing *a person*, or what it means to acknowledge the existence of another human being, to be (fully) analogical to a best case of knowing an object. It is with regard to best cases of knowing persons that he introduces the idea of a best case of acknowledgment, which he then works out in terms of tragedy and love – skepticism as the avoidance of love, and the avoidance of such a best case, as *lived* skepticism – particularly in his Shakespeare readings. That problematic does not really have a direct counterpart in external-world skepticism but is unique for how the skeptical problematic unravels in our relation to others. See in particular part four of *The Claim of Reason* and the Shakespeare-readings in *Disowning Knowledge*.

"being *so*" and "*being* so," respectively. There exists too an internal relation between these two sets of questions, since in order for us to ask *whether* something is *real/true/existent* we must first be able to tell *what* that thing *is*, whose realness/truth/existence we are considering: we have to know the identity of the object. In order for me to ask whether this hand (say, my hand), or this sheet of paper, or his or her pain, is real, I must know (in general) what a hand, or a sheet of paper, or pain, *is*. For Cavell, the archetypical question which initiates external-world skepticism is a question of "*being* so": It centers on the question "Is X real/does X exist/is X true?" rather than "What are the criteria of X?"

However, even if the skeptical question concerns the *existence* (or realness or truth) of the object – it is its "*being* so" that is at stake – it is not the existence of all sorts of objects that are put in question for a skeptical argument. The best case of knowledge must concern what Cavell calls a "generic" object and be "a claim that a present generic object exist."[145] This brings out another central distinction that Cavell makes, one of importance for the skeptical argument, namely the distinction between *Austinian* criteria and *Wittgensteinian/grammatical criteria*.

In both the Austinian and grammatical/Wittgensteinian cases, the criteria of the object are that by which the object is picked out *as* a specific something: the criteria are the means by which we identify something as that which it is, its "being *so*."[146] One of Cavell's own oft-quoted examples of the difference between a generic object (identified by Wittgensteinian or grammatical criteria) and an Austinian object (identified by Austinian criteria), is that of a bird and a goldfinch. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell writes:

> [I]n Austin's cases, justifying the provision of a name on the basis of established criteria is a full expression of your knowledge in the case. In them, "call" is related to non-grammatical criteria (features or marks) and specific objects (those about which the problem of knowledge is a problem of identification). The criteria relate this name to that (species of) object. It is a full test of your possession of the criteria (e.g., of a goldfinch) if you can recognize and name another such object when you see one (in a tree or a book or a museum showcase). In a Wittgensteinian context, "call" is related to grammatical criteria and generic objects. The criteria do not relate a name to an object, but, we might say, various concepts to the concept of that object. Here the test of your possession of a concept (e.g., of a chair, or a bird; of the meaning of a word; of what it is to know something) would be your ability to use the concept in conjunction with other concepts, your knowledge of which concepts are relevant to the one in question and which are not.[147]

[145] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 135.
[146] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp., 45, 51.
[147] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 73. The distinction is not one between type and token either, as if Austinian objects would concern specific occasions when it is *this* particular bird that has to be identified, while grammatical criteria would concern the identification of the *species* in question (say goldfinches in general).

I will not address to what extent these terms should be seen as reflecting something significant about Austin's and Wittgenstein's philosophy. The meaning and relevance of the terms do not hinge too much on that, I think. Or rather, in this context, I will content myself with making a few necessary points about how Wittgensteinian criteria relates to the work of Wittgenstein.[148] For my purposes, the central difference between what Cavell calls "Austinian" and "Wittgensteinian" criteria, is that the former (Austinian objects and their criteria), require some form of *expertise* and specialized knowledge, while all it takes to have knowledge of the latter (generic objects and Wittgensteinian criteria) is that one is a mature speaker of one's language.

Not knowing what a goldfinch is means not knowing a particular kind of bird; it is an ignorance that can be corrected by consulting an expert or a book. But not to know what *birds* are – that they have wings, they can often fly, that they are animals – that is, not being able to pick out a bird from, say, lizards, vegetables, stones, or proverbs etc. means that one is not in a position to instantly learn what a goldfinch is; too much is lacking in the setting of one's knowledge for this piece of knowledge to immediately find its place.[149] For a grown-up native English speaker (or native Swedish speaker), ignorance of what birds (or "fåglar") are would be conceptually and culturally odd in a way that not knowing what a goldfinch is, is not. It would require some form of explanation. Another example Cavell uses to illustrate the

[148] I agree with Mulhall that "To understand Cavell's appropriation of ordinary language philosophy, it is, accordingly, essential to grasp his reading of the Wittgensteinian notion of criteria." Stephen Mulhall,"Introduction", *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall, Blackwell Readers (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 5.

[149] Martin Gustafsson has a very illuminating example of how one can easily mistake Austinian for Wittgensteinian criteria. The example he addresses concerns the color of a wall. Gustafsson criticizes Stephen Mulhall who suggests that in settling a dispute over the color of the walls in my living room, my adversary and I could consult a color chart in an interior decoration book. Comparing the wall and color sample would then exemplify an appeal to grammatical criteria. However, I agree with Gustafsson that this "is just not right". Gustafsson writes that: "Typically, if someone were to dispute my claim that the color of my living room wall is blue rather than green, we would not try to settle the dispute by consulting the color chart […]. A color chart might be of help if we were quarreling about, say, whether a certain shade of green is called (by a certain paint maker) 'Apple Green' or 'Pear Green.' But a chart will not help us decide whether a given color is blue or green. In our world, color charts just do not have that kind of authority in this sort of case. If two people really disagree about whether a color of a wall is blue or green, and if they are at all confident in their ability to distinguish these colors, they will continue to disagree about whether the relevant color sample is blue or green." Martin Gustafsson, "Perfect Pitch and Austinian Examples: Cavell, McDowell, Wittgenstein, and the Philosophical significance of Ordinary Language," *Inquiry*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Aug. 2005), p. 369. What seems to be the case here is that Mulhall mistakes Austinian criteria for grammatical or Wittgensteinian criteria and thus makes the relevant authority some sort of expert on colors. But this is a good example of when I, if I am a competent language user who just like anybody else has learned what these colors are (called), can rely on my own eyes, in telling whether a color is (called) blue or green. Someone who is color blind, however, would not be authoritative in judging on this matter, regardless of being otherwise a mature member of the culture and authoritative speaker of the language.

difference is the contrast between knowing what a Louis XIII dining chair, and a chair is:

> Wittgensteinian or (as I will now begin calling them) grammatical criteria are not marks or features which require special training or a specialized environment to have mastered, whereas Austinian (non-grammatical) criteria do. There are technical handbooks which give us the features of various types and periods of furniture (what a Louis XIII dining chair is, how to recognize a Louis XIV chaise, etc.) but none which teach us what a chair is and what sitting on a chair is. None, we might say, which illustrate the essence of the matter. The demonstrative registers that we are to recollect those very general facts of nature or culture which we all, all who can talk and act together, do (must) in fact be using as criteria; facts we only need to recollect, for we cannot fail to know them in the sense of having never acquired them. If someone does not have them, that is not because his studies have been neglected, but because he is for some reason incapable of (or has been given up on as a candidate for) maturing into, or initiation into, full membership in the culture.[150]

It is clear that Cavell's term "grammatical" or "Wittgensteinian criteria" is referring to, and builds upon, Wittgenstein's idea of *grammar*. "Grammar," as Wittgenstein uses the term, is not the kind of grammar you learn at school when you *already have a language*. "Grammar" here denotes what you learn *as* you acquire your mother tongue and grow into a culture (or form of life) in which that language is spoken. This in turn has implications for what it is to give philosophical "grammatical remarks" or "grammatical reminders" in response to philosophical problems and conceptual bewilderments.

In order to give grammatical remarks or reminders, neither specialized nor expert knowledge of language is required. What is required is that one be a mature speaker of one's native language, since the grammatical remarks or reminders merely elicit and highlight certain logical and conceptual relations in the language in question – how one can use one's words to make (or not make) sense in various ways. These remarks and reminders are made in order to eradicate some *specific* philosophical confusions. They are not intended to map logical and conceptual relations in language in general, nor are they supposed to reveal any *new* knowledge or information. The logical and

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[150] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 72–73. Also: "If you do not know the (non-grammatical) criteria of an Austinian object (can't identify it, name it) then you lack a piece of information, a bit of knowledge, and you can be told its name, told what it is, told what it is (officially) called. But if you do not know the grammatical criteria of Wittgensteinian objects, then you lack, as it were, not only a piece of information or knowledge, but the possibility of acquiring any information about such objects *überhaupt;* you cannot be told the name of that object, because there is as yet no *object* of that kind for you to attach a forthcoming name to: the possibility of finding out what it is officially called is not yet open to you. (To *what* does the child attach the official name <Nyuw York>? The child's world contains no cities.) This is, I take it, part of what Wittgenstein wished to suggest in saying that 'Essence is expressed by grammar': You have to know *certain* things about an object in order to know *anything* (else) about it (about *it*)." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 77.

conceptual relations appealed to are, if acknowledged as valid, supposed to be familiar to the mature speakers of the language in the sense that they will recognize them as valid when the relations are pointed out.[151] So even if one *is* familiar with these relations through practice – even if the reminders only point out what one already knows *through use* – one may not have seen *the relevance* of these relations for the philosophical problem at hand until the ordinary language philosopher has pointed out *how* those relations are helpful. One may need to be *reminded* of such relations in the context of a specific philosophical inquiry in order to attain clarity.[152]

It is this sense of "grammar" that Cavell is here invoking as he discusses grammatical/Wittgensteinian criteria. To have or know the grammatical criteria of a thing is Cavell's way of describing what it means to know a word in a language at all. To know the grammatical criteria of a word like "chair" or "bird" – i.e. to have knowledge of a generic object that "everyone" in a culture and language knows – is to know what these things are and to be able to use these words meaningfully. To know the Austinian criteria of a word like "goldfinch" – i.e. the criteria of an Austinian object – is to have knowledge of something that not all mature speakers of that particular language and culture are equally authoritative in claiming to know. An ornithologist will be more authoritative than the man or woman on the street concerning what separates, say, a goldfinch from a goldcrest.

This gives me reason here to distinguish between two forms of *authority* that themselves have their derivation in these criteria. In the following discussion, therefore, I will separate what I call *grammatical* (or Wittgensteinian) *authority* from *expert* (or technical, specialized, or Austinian) *authority*. The first concerns the authority we have in saying what something means or whether something makes sense in our native language (in cases which do not require any special competence or training in order to exercise judgment). Here all mature speakers of a language and a culture are, in principle, on an equal footing to judge the matter. The second is, on the other hand, an authority connected with having acquired some form of specialized

[151] The situation is slightly different if I want to give grammatical remarks and reminders in a language of which I am not a native speaker, as is the case for me in this book. Here I will not have the same authority that a native speaker possesses in tracing what makes sense or not in the language. Yet, many grammatical, logical and cultural relations translate to English from Swedish. The main point here is that the philosophical authority of making appeals to what we say when are based in one having a language at all, and not on some specific expertise (within that language and culture). Accordingly, I have tried to pick out examples and cases which I think are essentially the same in both English and Swedish linguistic, conceptual, and cultural settings.

[152] "Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to *remind* ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §89, p. 36e.

knowledge or competence, according to which some people will be more authoritative than others.

Now, starting from a best case, the skeptical argument must, according to Cavell, begin with a claim *about a generic object*, an object whose criteria are of the Wittgensteinian/grammatical variety. Furthermore, the claim must be made in *optimal conditions* with no special circumstances apparently allowing for, or inviting, doubt.

So, for example, if I am unable to tell whether a bird in front of me is a goldfinch or a goldcrest, this will not incur *skeptical* doubt. Neither would a presumed expert's inability to do so. Obviously I am not an expert so there is no scandal in me not knowing, and apparently the presumed expert was not so much of an expert as had been claimed (or else the case is ambiguous, since the presumed goldfinch shows some, but not all, typical characteristics of a goldfinch, etc.). A case demanding *expert knowledge* and authority for assessment will *not* constitute a best case of knowledge in the required sense. Likewise, if I cannot tell from a distance, or through heavy fog, whether there really is a bird in front of me, this inability will not induce *skeptical* doubt because my failure to know can easily be accounted for due to sub-optimal circumstances.

What would need to happen for a doubt to expand globally and skeptically is if I had a bird (or another kind of generic object which "everyone knows") right in front of me – under optimal conditions such that there seems to be no space for doubt whatsoever – and in *that* situation, doubt is then cast over whether I know if that bird is really there. In these best case scenarios "'cast doubt,' does not mean 'showed it manifestly false'; it means 'raised an ordinary ground for doubt which shows the basis of the claim to be insufficient to establish it'."[153] The skeptic must make us feel there is ground for doubt where we typically did not imagine it possible, and thus invoke the reaction: If I cannot know *this*, then what can I ever know? The skeptical argument, beginning with a best claim of knowledge, will therefore take the following systematized route: [154]

[153] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 135.
[154] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 132, p. 144.

Claim (a best case of knowledge)	**Other-minds skepticism:** This man is in pain	**External-world skepticism:** Here is a hand / a sheet of paper / a tomato
Request for basis	How do you know?	How do you know?
Basis	I see it (from his behavior).	I see it (from its characteristic features). Or: By means of the senses.
Ground for doubt	That is not enough, he may be feigning/acting, or perhaps he reacts differently from how you, or normal people do. Besides, all you see is the external behavior, never the real pain itself inside him.	That is not enough, do you see all of it? How do you know it is not a perfect replica? Your senses may not represent truthfully what is really there. Or you may be dreaming and there really is nothing physical there at all.
Conclusion about the best case	So I do not know if he is in pain.	So I do not really know that there is a hand / a sheet of paper / a tomato here.
Moral / General conclusion	We can never know what someone else really thinks or feels.	We can never have true knowledge about the external world and its objects.

This is the route Descartes followed as he sat by the fire conducting his philosophical meditations. The image of him sitting there, holding a piece of paper in his hands, appears to be nothing but a best case of knowledge. No expert knowledge is required to know what a hand or a piece of paper is (in the required sense here). The conditions for assessing their realness and existence are optimal: Descartes sits by the fire, looking straight at his hands and the paper, both of which are clearly visible from close distance and in the light of the fire – and yet, what if he is dreaming? How does he know that both the sheet of paper and his hands are as they appear according to his sense impressions, or even that they are really *there* at all? And if he is in a perpetual dream-state, both when he is dreaming and when he *thinks* he is awake, how does he know that he has a body at all, or that physical things exist in the world?

2.1.2. The Skeptic's Dilemma and the Epistemologist as a Skeptical Twin: Moore and the Misfiring of Claims in Non-Claim Contexts.

What happens, though, when the skeptic follows his or her reasoning through to its logical conclusion? Descartes's attempt to disprove the skeptic famously begins with him, in the second meditation, finding his "firm and immovable" Archimedean point, that which he *cannot* doubt, namely that he

thinks: "*I am, I exist,* is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind."[155] Even while doubting, even if he is being deceived, he is continuously thinking, and as a thinking thing he must *exist*. He then begins to expand what he claims to know with certainty: of God's nature and existence as well as the validity of mathematical truths and the reliability of the natural light of reasoning (meditations three and five); that he can avoid error if he withholds judgment when he does not perceive something clearly and distinctly (meditation four); that the external world indeed exists and that one can most of the time trust one's senses as long as judgment is exercised scrupulously (in meditation six), etc.[156] Descartes's strategy is to *counter* head-on skeptical doubt by putting forth claims to *know*.

A more modern example of a head-on attempt to disprove the skeptic with knowledge claims (not hinging on the existence of God for support), and which both Wittgenstein and Cavell respond to, can be found in G.E. Moore's two articles "Proof of an External World" and "A Defence of Common Sense."[157] Moore's case is instructive because it gives me an occasion to explicate what it means for the epistemologist to exist as the skeptic's *twin* and why a straightforward attempt to disprove the skeptic head on will fail. It is because of this that the epistemologist is at heart equally skeptical.

First, just like the skeptic, Moore begins by appealing to best cases of knowledge. In "Proof of an External World," Moore famously claims to be proving the existence of the external world in the following manner: "I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'Here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'."[158] Now, there are evidently multifarious ways to approach and understand Moore's argument here, but I will merely note that in a sense his claim is identical to the skeptic's, the only exception being that he says we *do* know when the skeptic claims we *do not*. For both the skeptic and the epistemologist (Moore), the entire existence of the physical world at that moment lies in (the existence of) Moore's hands: if we can claim to know that they exist, Moore is taken to have proven the existence of the physical world. If we can doubt the existence of Moore's hands, our entire grip on the world disappears.[159]

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[155] Descartes, "Second Meditation: The Nature of the Human Mind, and How it is Better Known than the Body," *Meditations of First Philosophy*, p. 16, p. 17.
[156] Descartes, Meditations 2–6, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, pp. 16–62.
[157] G.E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," (1925) and "Proof of an External World," (1939) in G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin / New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), pp. 32–59, pp. 127–150.
[158] Moore, "Proof of the External World," pp. 145–146.
[159] "All of existence is squeezed into the philosopher's tomato [or some other generic object] when he rolls it towards his overwhelming question. The experience is one I might now describe as one of looking at the world as though it were another *object*, on a par with particular envelopes, tomatoes, pieces of wax, bells, tables, etc. If this is craven, it is a craving not for

However, whereas both Moore and the skeptic think of this as a matter of truth and knowledge – either we know that the hands exist or we do not – both Cavell and Wittgenstein interrogate these claims with regard to their meaningfulness, asking whether either of them are (fully) making sense.[160] In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein writes:

> We teach a child "that is your hand", not "that is perhaps (or "probably") your hand". That is how a child learns the innumerable language-games that are concerned with his hand. An investigation or question, 'whether this is really a hand' never occurs to him. Nor, on the other hand, does he learn that he *knows* that this is a hand.[161]

As a child learns a language, he or she is initiated into a culture and starts to understand what a hand is and what it makes sense to say about, and do with, hands; in short, what the child acquires is the grammatical criteria of "hand." In doing so, the child surely learns that he or she has (or has not) hands, and what the implications of that are in a set of increasingly complex and overlapping contexts. But what the child most certainly does not learn, what is not part of the grammar of knowing what a hand is, is to think of it in terms of this *maybe* being my hand. That is not a question that comes *natural* for us who know what a hand is and how one talks meaningfully of hands (in general).

What Wittgenstein reminds us of here is that unless some specific context is provided in which it *makes sense* to doubt whether there is a hand here (my hand), it is not immediately intelligible what it would *mean* to doubt it.[162] But provided with a specific scenario – say of mutilated war veterans, or of an imagined future in which many of us have become cyborgs and ex-

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generality (if that means for *generalization*) but for *totality*. It is an expression of what I meant when I said that we want to know the world as we imagine God knows it. And that will be as easy to rid us of as it is easy to rid us of the prideful craving to be God – I mean *rid* us of it, not to replace it with a despair at our finitude.", Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 236–237.

[160] However, in fairness to Moore it should be noted that in "A Defence of Common Sense," he writes: "I am not at all sceptical as to the *truth* of such propositions as 'The earth has existed for many years past', 'Many human bodies have each lived for many years upon it', i.e. propositions which assert the existence of material things: on the contrary, I hold that we all know, with certainty, many such propositions to be true. But I am very sceptical as to what, in certain respects, the correct *analysis* of such propositions is. And this is a matter as to which I think I differ from many philosophers." Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," p. 53. This could suggest that Moore still had some qualms with regard to the final *meanings* of his common-sense truism, with regard to what we really mean when we, or what it really means to, say them. But I will not elaborate on this subject here.

[161] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 374, p. 48e.

[162] "The idealist's question would be something like: 'What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?' (And to that the answer can't be: I *know* that they exist.) But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off." Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 24, p. 5e.

change body parts as gifts – such questions could begin to make sense. But until such a context is presented in which it makes sense to *claim* "Here is a hand" or "Here is *my* hand" neither the claim nor the doubt should instantly be accepted as making sense – as yet they have not been *given* sense. Wittgenstein makes a similar point in the context of other-minds skepticism. In response to a best case of knowing if someone else is sick (or in pain), Wittgenstein writes:

> I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively into his face. – So I don't know, then, that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion makes sense. Any more than the assertion "I am here", which I might yet use at any moment, if suitable occasion presented itself. [...] And "I know that there's a sick man lying here", used in an *unsuitable* situation, seems not to be nonsense but rather seems matter-of-course, only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it, and one thinks that the words "I know that..." are always in place where there is no doubt, and hence even when the expression of doubt would be unintelligible.[163]

Another grammatical remark that Wittgenstein is making here, with regard to meaningful usages of words like "know" and "doubt," is that "to know" is not automatically meaningful in contexts where doubt is itself lacking or is unintelligible. Neither will talk of "doubt" make sense where reasons for doubt are lacking. This means that both claims to know and claims to doubt require that there is (meaningful, conceptual, logical and grammatical) space for such claims.

This brings me to what Cavell describes as both the skeptic's and the epistemologist's failure in the presence of a best case – what makes their claims not fully meaningful, not fully *natural*. Both the skeptic and epistemologist face the dilemma of trying to make a claim in a "*non-claim context*."[164] Cavell writes: "*Is* the example the philosopher produces imaginable as an example of a particular claim to knowledge? What are his examples examples of?"[165] With regard to this question, the emphasis should lay on "particular": in what sense is Moore's knowledge claim a claim about something *specific*? What is Moore trying to say by uttering those words, and to whom? Presumably that *here there is really a hand!* OK, but what does he want us to *see* by saying that, while we (if we can imagine we belong to his audience for a moment) are looking, staring, at the hand that is (already) present? For the role that Moore wishes his knowledge claims to serve, it is unimportant that the hands are his – so there is nothing about *his* hands (his experience of them, or their special form) or anything about *hands* in general

[163] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 10, p. 3e.
[164] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 218. Cavell's italics.
[165] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 205. Cavell's italics.

that he wants to inform us.[166] There is absolutely *nothing* about his hands he wishes to say – except that they exist. Is he really telling us this? Informing us this? If so, Cavell responds with the following grammatical remark:

> [T]here must, in grammar, be reasons for what you say, or be point in your saying of something, if what you say is to be comprehensible. […] What is left out of an expression if it is used "outside its ordinary language game" is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost.[167]

This is very important. It is not as if Cavell thinks that the combination of words "Here is a hand" or "I know this is a hand" by themselves – as if, due to some underlying rules of grammar and quite independent of what *we* do and think and say with these words – were debarred from possible use.[168] Instead it is Moore who has not *given* his words a specific meaning in this context. He has no obvious sensible reason for *claiming* or telling us, who already know in general what hands and physical objects *are* (their criteria) and who see his hands (they are in front of us), that his hands exist.[169] His words, in this context, are empty.

> It is on the ground that philosophical statements […] are not *informative* (though they are uttered, in philosophizing, as though they are), that they say nothing, that Wittgenstein objects to them […]. "Not saying anything" is one way philosophers do not know what they mean. In this case it is not that they mean something *other* than they say, but that they do not see that they mean

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[166] In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein writes: "Moore says he *knows* that the earth existed long before his birth. And put like that it seems to be a personal statement about him, even if it is in addition a statement about the physical world. Now it is philosophically uninteresting whether Moore knows this or that, but it is interesting that, and how, it can be known. If Moore had informed us that he knew the distance separating certain stars, we might conclude from that that he had made some special investigations, and we shall want to know what these were. But Moore chooses precisely a case in which we all seem to know the same as he, and without being able to say how. I believe e.g. that I know as much about this matter (the existence of the earth) as Moore does, and if he knows that it is as he says, then *I* know it too. For it isn't, either, as if he had arrived at his proposition by pursuing some line of thought which, while it is open to me, I have not in fact pursued." Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* § 84, pp. 12–13e.

[167] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 206–207.

[168] "For when Moore says 'I know that that's…' I want to reply 'you don't *know* anything!' – and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention. That is, I feel (rightly?) that these two mean to say something different." Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 407 p. 52e.

[169] "'A is a physical object' is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what 'A' means, or what 'physical object' means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and 'physical object' is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity,…) And that is why no such proposition as: 'There are physical objects' can be formulated. Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn." Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* § 36, p. 7e.

> *nothing* (that *they* mean nothing, not that their statements mean nothing, are nonsense). The extent to which this is, or seems to be, true, is astonishing.[170]

But has Moore really not said anything? Must Moore be understood as *claiming* something (and failing to do so) in this way? Could he not rather be seen as giving a casual remark? Do we not make casual remarks about trivial truths all the time? To this Cavell replies: "Of course you may 'simply remark' or note or register the presence of something, or that something is so. But that does not mean that just anything, just any time, can (grammatically, comprehensibly) be remarked."[171] And is that, after all, what the epistemologist or the skeptic intends – giving casual remarks? No. They want to claim either that we know or do not know a certain thing – a certain something whose existence bears within itself the existence of the entire external world.

However – and this becomes the dilemma of the best case – in order for the best case of knowledge to be *best* there can be no room for doubt. By the same token, if there is nothing in the context that invites or allows for doubt, then what is there left to claim, to state, to tell anyone?[172] The skeptic must therefore mean something he or she *cannot* mean. If the claim is to be meaningful it must make sense to *make* that claim, it must say *something*. Truth itself does not constitute such a reason if nobody needs to be informed about that particular truth – and since it is a best case of knowledge about a generic object, no one does.

Let me illustrate this point further: If I walked around town uttering "truths" like "The earth is round," "I have two legs," "I have a body," "2+2=4," and more of that sort, would we say that what I was obviously *doing* was spreading (or preaching or telling) the truth? I do not think so. Unless I had some conceivable *reason* for saying these things, this would constitute *mad* behavior.[173] Moreover, what I would actually *mean* by saying

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[170] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 210.
[171] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 210.
[172] "If an utterance is meant to tell someone something, then what you say to him must be something he is in a position to understand, and something which is, or which you have reason to believe will be, informative, something which is news to him." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 209.
[173] Niklas Forsberg construes a similar example while discussing logical truths and laws, for instance the law of the excluded middle, in the context of ordinary language. He writes: "But 'the law of the excluded middle' is not part of ordinary language in the sense that we can expect it to be commonly and meaningfully uttered by someone. In fact, this is precisely the kind of thing no one would be expected to say. Of course, we may easily come up with a context in which the sentence 'Either it is raining or it is not raining' may do some work – say in an attempt at comedy ridiculing weather reports. […] [Or:] picture a man dressed up in cap and gown, occupying the same corner in your hometown every day, repeating the phrase 'Either it is raining or not raining,' accompanied by a stern stare, to everyone that passes him by. We would not consider him a messenger of truth. Remove comedy and we move into madness." Niklas Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (New York, London, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013) p. 100. In that discussion Forsberg makes a reference to Johannes Climacus's (or Søren Kierke-

these things would not be clear immediately, just because we can imagine *other* situations where these words could be used meaningfully. There is indeed something about how the philosopher's predicament here resembles, or courts, madness that Cavell wants to highlight. He writes:

> I imagine myself staring at an object, a generic object, not with a question I wish to put at it, nor a use I wish to put it to, but as though I am only my eyes, bodiless, even mindless. And I find I want to say: "*That* – that thing there – is what it is. It *is*, in itself, none of the things we *say* it is. It escapes language in the end." Is what it is? In itself? I am saying: it is *that*! (pointing to it, fastening my eyes upon it). I am trying to say: "That is that" and make those words say something informative. And, having now declared that intention, I feel dissatisfied – with my own dissatisfaction. I have informed myself of nothing. Or I find myself wanting to say: The object itself is ineluctably hidden from me, just the other side of experience; I only see it *as it presents itself to me* (a phrase again used in a context in which its natural complement "How does it present itself to *you?*" has no answer, or not the right sort of answer); it is *there*, all right, but inaccessible.[174]

The more desperately the philosopher tries to fix the object with his or her gaze, as if to hold it absolutely still, absolutely present, the further the object seems to slip away. There is nothing the philosopher wants the generic object to do, he or she wants *nothing* from it – except for it simply to *be*. And in that, dead, sterile relationship, the object starts to disappear. All the ordinary dealings with it and our ways of speaking of it are gone, its role in our everyday lives is shut out. Left in the vacuum outside language games, outside real use, the words that were supposed to bridge the gap of uncertainty, disintegrate. They cannot carry the philosopher to the object any longer. The philosopher cannot carry his or her own words any longer. What is left is muteness. All that remains is an *illusion* of saying something, an illusion of sense:

> The point is not that you sometimes cannot say (or think) what is the case, but that to say (or think) something is the case *you must say or think it*, and "saying that" (or "thinking that") has its conditions. The philosopher feels

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gaard's) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* which also fits my case above. Climacus writes: "The objective truth as such does not at all decide that the one stating it is sensible; on the contrary, it can even betray that the man is [a] lunatic." Johannes Climacus [Søren Kierkegaard], *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation an Existential Contribution*, ed. Søren Kierkegaard (1846) Vol. I, eds. and transl. with introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 194. Climacus exemplifies his point with a story of a patient at a madhouse who escapes and visits a friend. In order to convince his friend that he is not crazy the mad man "paces up and down the floor and continually says, 'Boom! The earth is round!'" Climacus, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 195. In this case it is quite obvious that the truth of the fact that the earth *is* round does not save the man from suspicions of insanity.

[174] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 238–239.

> that he must say and think beyond these conditions; he wants to speak without the commitments speech exacts. I could express this by saying: In philosophizing we come to be dissatisfied with answers that depend upon *our* meaning something by an expression, as though what *we* meant by it were more or less arbitrary. (As we sometimes feel about our more obviously moral commitments that they are more or less arbitrary, and that if they are to have *real* or full power they must be rooted in, or "based upon", a reality deeper than the fact of morality itself.) It is as though we try to get the world to provide answers in a way which is independent of our responsibility for *claiming* something to be so (to get God to tell us what we must do in a way which is independent of our responsibility for choice).[175]

The route of arguments both the skeptic and the epistemologist have taken leads to a dilemma, and eventually results in him or her saying *nothing*. But this is a nothing that appears as a something: it is *hidden* nonsense. It is a process Cavell describes as starting through "depriv[ing] a statement of […] context, then to fix reality, or construct a theory, which provides this sense another way."[176] This procedure in turn calls for an explanation of the skeptic's behavior: "Why? Why does only *his* way satisfy him?"[177] If Cavell is right in saying that the words of both the skeptic and the skeptical twin are empty, why would anyone wish to say *nothing* (except pure and empty truth)? Why would one want to cut oneself loose from all context? As if contexts were *boundaries* preventing one's words from reaching somewhere deeper, higher, further than they would otherwise go? Another way to ask this question about what motivates the skeptic would be: What is so *tempting* about skepticism?

2.1.3. The Truth in Skepticism and the Disappointment of Criteria: Acknowledgment or Repudiation of Grammatical Criteria. Avoidance and Other-Minds Skepticism as Tragedy

Moore represents one way of trying (but failing) to refute the skeptic head-on. In part his failure stems from him taking the skeptic too seriously (or seriously in the wrong way); Moore too readily accepts that the raising of categorical doubt (and therefore also the counter-claim that we *do* know) makes sense. This is how the epistemologist (the realist) becomes a skeptical twin: both the skeptic and the epistemologist take our relation to the world, on which our knowledge of it rests, to itself be (or require) a relation of knowledge.

Another failed attempt, which some followers of Wittgenstein are perhaps more prone to pursue, is, according to Cavell, not taking the skeptic seriously enough (or in the right way). In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein writes:

[175] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 215–216.
[176] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 212.
[177] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 212.

> But is it an adequate answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurance of the realist, to say that "There are physical objects" is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shewn; but that isn't the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an *investigation* is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic.[178]

This passage brings out a point crucial for both Wittgenstein and Cavell's appeal to the ordinary – as well as their appeal to grammar and the authority that arises from what we usually say, and do, and mean. This point could be stated thus: you cannot *tell* the skeptic, or his or her epistemological twin, that he or she is not making sense – you have to *show* it to him or her. And this is *essential* for the philosophical methods of both, and crucial for Cavell's understanding of what "ordinary language philosophy" is. It is not just a matter of pedagogy or courtesy.[179] In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cavell writes:

> The appeal to ordinary language cannot directly repudiate the skeptic (or the traditional philosopher generally) by, for example, finding what he says contradicts what we ordinarily say or by claiming that he cannot mean what he says: the former is no surprise to him and the latter is not obviously more than a piece of abuse. What the appeal can and ought directly to do is to display what the skeptic does or must mean, even how he can mean what he says. What other way is there to take him seriously? And if his critic has not taken him seriously, why should he listen to what he is told? He knows he is not understood.[180]

If the skeptic is just as much a competent language user as the ordinary language philosopher, then no appeals to grammatical criteria, *which the skeptic does not acknowledge as his or her own,* or which he or she cannot see the *relevance* of in the context of the problem at hand – will have any power

[178] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 37, p. 7e.

[179] Cavell writes: "Understanding from inside a view you are undertaking to criticize is sound enough practice whatever the issue. But in the philosophy which proceeds from ordinary language, understanding from inside is methodologically fundamental. Because the way you must rely upon yourself as a source of what is said when, demands that you grant full title to others as sources of that data – not out of politeness, but because the nature of the claim you make for yourself is repudiated without that acknowledgement: it is a claim that no one knows better than you whether and when a thing is said, and if this is not to be taken as a claim to expertise (a way of taking it which repudiates it) then it must be understood to mean that you know no better than others what you claim to know. With respect to the data of philosophy our positions are the same. This is scarcely a discovery of ordinary language philosophy; it is the latest confirmation of what the oracle said to Socrates." Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," pp. 239–240.

[180] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," p. 240.

over what meaning, or lack of meaning, the skeptic will see in his or her words. This means that grammatical reminders, grammatical criteria, cannot and should not be used to somehow intellectually *bully* the skeptics into admitting that they are being nonsensical. Indeed, what grammatical criteria most certainly cannot do is in any way *prove* that the skeptic is nonsensical.

> What are Wittgensteinian criteria supposed to do? On the part both of those who wish to defend Wittgenstein and those who wish to attack him, it is taken, roughly, that his criteria are supposed to be the means by which the existence of something is established with certainty – in perhaps the most famous case, the criteria of pain (outward criteria of course) are the means by which we can know with certainty that another is in pain […]. I might put it as the first phase of my argument to show that criteria cannot do this and, on my reading of the *Investigations*, are not meant to. On the contrary, the fate of criteria, or their limitation, reveals, I should like to say, the truth of skepticism – though this may require a reinterpretation of what skepticism is, or threatens.[181]

This passage contains many important points. Let me begin with the role of grammatical criteria, and how an appeal to such criteria can respond to skeptical doubt. Now, as criteria are criteria of "being *so*" not of "*being* so," the skeptic is indeed right in noting that just because I know the grammatical criteria of the word "pain," this knowledge does not *insure* that whenever I see a behavior that meets this criteria I can automatically be certain – as if guaranteed by my mastery of a word – that the person exhibiting this behavior *is really* in pain. Indeed, criteria are what actors and impostors (for their different purposes) exhibit in order to portray or feign inner states and conditions. They exhibit the outward expressions of what we, who know the criteria of these things, would call "pain," "happiness," "love," "fidelity," and so on. In short: "There are no criteria for a thing's *being* so over and above the criteria for is being *so*."[182]

This testifies to a *truth* in skepticism, to a point the skeptic correctly indicates (even though it is worked out in a confused manner). Even if I know the criteria of a thing, this knowledge will not guarantee the realness, existence or truth of this thing in an individual case. The skeptic is right therefore to say: I *can* be duped, to be duped is *possible*. And he or she may be con-

[181] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 6–7.

[182] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 51. See also: "It is because of *that* satisfaction that we know that he is feigning pain (i.e., that it is pain he is feigning), and that he knows what to do to feign pain. Criteria are 'criteria for something's being so', not in the sense that they tell us of a thing's existence, but of something like its identity, not of its *being* so, but of its being *so*. Criteria do not determine the certainty of statements, but the application of the concepts employed in statements." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 45. Compare to Descartes's contention in the first meditation: "I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep." Descartes, "First Meditation: What Can be Called into Doubt," *Meditations of First Philosophy*, p. 13.

sidered to be justified in appreciating the vulnerability this predicament puts us in – not least in our relation to others.

However, it is precisely in response to this existential vulnerability and uncertainty that the skeptic makes the critical, inauspicious, move, i.e., draws from this truth conclusions that are confused as well as escapist. The skeptic's response becomes an avoidance of that very truth, it becomes an avoidance of the responsibility this truth places upon him or her. Feeling engulfed in this inherent *risk* of deceit and fallibility that comes with the human conditions of knowledge, the skeptic does not succeed in facing up to this frightful predicament of existential vulnerability but transforms it (as if to disarm it) into an intellectual puzzle. This is where one begins to sneak up on the *temptation* of skepticism. It is the temptation of intellectualization and avoidance, in turn related to what is *disappointing* about criteria and what we can and cannot do with them:

> What is disappointing about criteria? In a philosophical mood, we wanted the wince to take us all the way to the other's pain itself, but it seems to stop at the body. The feeling is: The wince itself is one thing, the pain itself is something else; the one can't *be* the other. But what happened to the pain that was *in* (what we called) the wince? That – the pain he's wincing in – is what I called his being in pain, and pitied. […] But we left something inexplicit in our rehearsal of the schematism of pain. I left out my responses to the criteria as they emerge. […] We left inexplicit the call such knowledge imposes upon me for comforting, succoring, healing; to make the fabric whole again which the pain tore through, or to know that this is impossible. That is knowing what pain is.[183]

What the traditional epistemological account of knowing someone else's pain (or inner states) tends to leave out, Cavell suggests – while furthermore implying that this omission is a central part of the philosophical problem – is the real life setting such inquiries have. What is left out in the intellectualized quest for certainty is *why* we are (or are not) normally concerned with others people's pain. It ignores the fact that the pains of others matter to us and that nothing in the realness of pain itself ensures that others know or care about my pain. Traditional epistemological worries about whether or not I really know someone else's pain *intensely forget* (or avoid addressing) the significance of how the pain of others (the abundance of its overwhelming realness in our lives) is difficult, fearful, and demanding. This means that what is also left out of the picture, according to Cavell, is that "my reference to another's pain" and my primary way of relating to it "are my (more or less) modified responses to it."[184] It is in such real life concerns and contexts – where pain can be pitied, ignored, or even cruelly inflicted – that we learn

[183] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 81–82.
[184] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 342.

and know what pain *is*. It is in the context of these concerns (language-games if you like) that the concept of "pain" endures.

> What is disappointing about criteria? There is something they do not do; it can seem the essential. I have to know what they are for; I have to accept them, use them. […] To withhold, or hedge, our concepts of psychological states from a given creature, on the ground that our criteria cannot reach to the inner life of the creature, is specifically to withhold the source of my idea that living beings are things that feel; it is to withhold myself, to reject my response to anything as a living being; to blank so much as my idea of anything *having* a body. To describe *this* condition as one in which I do not know (am not certain) of the existence of other minds, is empty. There is now nothing there, of the right kind, to be known. There is nothing to read from that body, nothing the body is *of*; it does not go beyond itself, it expresses nothing; it does not so much as behave.[185]

What grammatical criteria cannot do, for instance the grammatical criteria of "pain," is to tell me how to accept the possibility of knowledge they offer: *I* have to make use of them. I have to acknowledge them as being mine and as being expressive of what I understand and know.

Let me return again to the best case of knowing that someone is in pain. Let me borrow Wittgenstein's case with the man in his sick-bed. It has to be a *best* case in order to summon the required significance, so let me say the sick man is my grandfather. I know that man. I have known him all my life. I have spent innumerable days and nights at his house. We have quarreled about politics. We have talked about everything. He is like an extra parent to me. Now I sit at his bedside and look at his beloved old face which wears the grim grimace of suppressed pain. I hold his hand as he breathes heavily and I can hear how every breath is hard-won: his eyes are wincing and he moans as he clutches my hand… What is it that I do not know here? What would it *mean* to reject what I am aware of with a breaking heart, namely that this man is right now in *excruciating* pain and there is not very much I can do to relieve it? What would it *mean* to say, *here*, in my best case: "How can I know whether he is *really* in pain? All I have is his external behavior!" What *is* the rejection and avoidance of a best case of knowing someone else is in pain? What *is* the rejection of knowing that someone else has a mind which can feel and think (and harbor pain)? Such a rejection has at least two forms, as I understand Cavell: as *lived* skepticism and as (philosophical) skepticism in the form of intellectualization and distortion.

To begin with the second form: the example of my grandfather is a fictive scenario, one that I invoke to philosophically scrutinize what skepticism and knowing other minds are. However, in order for it to have any (philosophical) bearing I must of course imagine it as truthfully and faithfully as I can: I must imagine what would really be at stake if such a case *were* real. Now, if

[185] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 83–84.

I were to say, in the face of this example that I do not *really* know that my grandfather is in pain something happens with my words.

According to a skeptical line of argumentation, the conclusion is that I do *not know*, after all, that this man (in a best case: my own grandfather) is in pain. The moral, or ensuing skeptical conclusion that follows is that I can never know if someone is in pain. But here my reaction takes the following form: if I do not know that *he* is in pain – my own grandfather as I sit and hold his hand – then the very concept of *pain*, of *others being in pain at all*, what I could possibly ever mean by that expression, starts to dissolve before me. It becomes unclear *what* it is I imagine I do not have access to or do not know.[186]

Here the skeptic could retort by addressing the "being *so*" issue and say: But you do not know the pain (if he actually has it) as *he* knows it – from inside – how it feels *for him.* Therefore you do not *really* know that *that* is pain, that is, what *you* would call pain. So in order for you to *really* know of his pain, you would have to know it as he knows it, i.e. by *having* it.

But two things are very disturbing and awkward, or unnatural, with this reply. The first concerns a logical flaw in a stricter sense of the term, while the second constitutes a logical flaw in a wider sense, in terms of what is really at stake here, that is, with respect to what matters for me or us, in a best case of this kind.

First, the skeptic imagines that for me to *really* know my grandfather's pain (or any other human being's pain) I would need to *have* it – to have *that* pain. And not in the sense I *can* have that pain (in the sense that we can have the same kind of pain, say, a headache or a broken leg). The point is that I am meant to know how the pain feels *for him*, in his body, through his mind, as he has it. But these criteria of "knowing his pain" are construed in such a way that it becomes not only practically impossible but – and this is an important part of Cavell's critique – also logically and conceptually impossible for me to meet such criteria. These criteria are not in accordance with what we have learned (and how we have learned) about other people being in pain. They are at odds with, denies, how we learned that other people can be in pain, what we know that pain means to them, what it means that they can and do suffer various forms of pain, and how we can know of their suffering when we learned what pain *is*. *That* – the thing the skeptic tries to imagine I cannot reach – is not what we ordinarily *mean* when we talk (meaningfully) about (knowing) someone's pain. Having *that* (his pain which only he can have) was never our criterion for knowing that someone is in pain. In order for me to have *that*, the skeptic suggests, I would have to *be* my grandfather. But what *is* that, or what would *that* be? Can I even coherently imagine what would satisfy that requirement*?* No. Which means that I do not know really

[186] Compare to Cavell's example with a man having a toothache, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 69–70. I will bring that example into discussion in 2.2.2.

understand what "*that"* really is, what it would be to have "it" – which implies that I do not know what the skeptic means. I cannot fully make sense of his or her words. And in fact I do not think the skeptic knows what he or she means either, because he or she cannot mean "that" fully and coherently. He or she has not imagined something that makes complete sense as a conceivable something at all.[187]

Secondly, this way of intellectualizing what "knowing whether someone is in pain" ignores and avoids entirely the concerns we usually have as we try to find out whether others are in pain. It ignores what *motivates* us wanting to know. And without acknowledging these concerns, which are part of the fabric of our lives in which such language games regarding pain make sense to us, we have already repudiated an important part of our grammatical criteria of "pain."

What both critiques point to is that the skeptic tries to speak about the "pain" of others while, at the same time, he or she is trying to ignore, avoid, or transgress *the conditions* under which the word is meaningfully used about the pain of others. In doing so, the skeptic seeks to avoid the responsibility that befalls us speakers for making sense. What the rejection of the best case of knowing someone else is in pain *shows,* is that the repudiation of such a best case – which initially was supposed to concern the question of the "*being* so" of the pain (is the pain *real*, is it *there?*) – in fact leads to the *annihilation* of the "being *so*" instead. What happens is that the very identity of that which was doubted in the first place (namely, the criteria and identity of "pain"), starts to dissolve. The skeptic's conclusions make it dubious *what* I take myself to doubt.

In *The Claim of Reason* Cavell writes: "In making the knowledge of others a metaphysical difficulty, philosophers deny how real the practical difficulty is of coming to know another person, and how little we can reveal of ourselves to another's gaze, or bear it."[188] Cavell is here addressing how other-minds skepticism is both an intellectual but also a moral problematic, and that the skeptic is in fact incapable of shouldering both. Part of the problem of skepticism is its tendency to intellectualize and distort a real human, existential difficulty and "[d]oubtless such denials are part of the motive which sustains metaphysical difficulties."[189] In this way, other-minds skepticism is an attempt to *escape* the burden of knowing others through intellectualization. Cavell writes: "we take what we have fixed or constructed to be *discoveries* about the world" – namely the horrible insight that knowledge will not take us all the way to (or relieve us from) the other's pain – "to reveal the human condition rather than our escape or denial of this condition through the rejection of the human conditions of knowledge and action and the sub-

[187] I will explore this theme in more detail in my discussion of Conant in 2.2.
[188] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 90.
[189] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 90.

stitution of fantasy."[190] One form such a fantasy can take is a general situation of everybody misunderstanding one another, a collective inability to fully express ourselves or to read the other:

> A fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness [and an ultimate impossibility of knowing others] would solve a simultaneous set of metaphysical problems: it would relieve me of the responsibility for making myself known to others – […] it would suggest that my responsibility for self-knowledge takes care of itself – as though the fact that others cannot know my (inner) life means that I cannot fail to. […] The wish underlying this fantasy covers a wish that underlies skepticism, a wish for the connection between my claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without my intervention, apart from my agreements.[191]

What the intellectualized understanding of our separateness does is to *hide* (and thus avert) my real and practical possibilities of bridging our separateness: attempts requiring courage, empathy, consciousness, patience, trust, etc. "The truth here," Cavell writes, is "that we *are* separate, but not necessarily *separated* (*by* something)."[192] The fantasy of us being necessarily separated by the very individuality of our beings (be it our bodies, or our minds, or both, that is perceived of as constituting the impenetrable wall dividing us) is an escape from the demanding insight that in order to know others, I must yield to the conditions of mutual understanding. Not only must I tame to some extent my own ego and overcome some of my own fears – otherwise these obstacles will tempt me to mold the other into some fictive figure I imagine will satisfy my needs for intimacy (but who can do so no more than a doll or a slave can) – but I must also accept that, in return, I have to reveal myself to this other. This can be a terrifying prospect not only because I must accordingly give up the fantasy of being the sole or ultimate authority in revealing (not least to myself) who I am, but because I may also have a difficult time imagining that anyone would *want* to continue to know me, or stay by me, once they know who I am. The chance of intimacy carries with it the risk of exposure and rejection.[193]

This difficulty in turn brings me to Cavell's treatment of the problematic he calls *lived* skepticism, that is, the non-intellectualized exploration of the problems and risks of knowing others he finds in Shakespearean tragedies (and comedies). Cavell's investigations of lived skepticism are emblematically expressed in his readings of *King Lear* and *Othello*. Cavell explores the failures to acknowledge the other, the rejections of our knowledge of others

[190] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 216.
[191] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 351–352.
[192] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 369.
[193] Cavell writes: "The question is still why my hand is ever stretched out, even in the form of a fist. It shows that I want something of another. It shows that I am exposed to my humanity." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 439.

in and through these tragedies by way of a textual investigation into how key protagonists engage in different forms of avoiding love, along with the risks that love brings with it: "both skepticism and tragedy conclude with the condition of human separation, with a discovering that I am I; and the fact that the alternative to my acknowledgement of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him."[194] In contrast to external-world skepticism, the problem of the other's existence (in its non-intellectualized, tragic form), is a real difficulty we all encounter in our everyday lives. We can be skeptical towards others by acting out our disappointments with the conditions of knowing them.

Lived skepticism is the counterpart to what avoidance would be if my imaginary best case (of my sick grandfather) was *not* imaginary – or put otherwise: if it was not simply an example that satisfied the purpose of intellectual curiosity alone. This is where literature comes into the picture. In Shakespearean tragedy, the conditions of our knowledge of others, and our disappointment in that knowledge (i.e. the fact that mere knowledge will not satisfy our needs for, and claims on, the other), are essential to the drama, Cavell argues. The murderous jealousy of Othello, or the death-bringing rejections of Lear are, according to Cavell's readings, not motivated by what the protagonists did not know. Instead, these men knew all the relevant things there was to know about their loved ones: Desdemona and Cordelia were their *lived* best cases, their best cases of acknowledgment and love. However, neither Othello nor Lear could acknowledge the conditions of what they knew, or the conditions of that acknowledgment. As a consequence – haunted by the fear of rejection, deceit, and of the sheer possibility that the loved one *could* harbor hidden betrayal in her mind (even if they knew otherwise) – they themselves bring about the final separation by extinguishing the very possibility of acknowledgment: by directly or indirectly killing their best cases.[195]

Cavell's talk about lived skepticism describes, as I understand him, moments when the conditions of our knowledge of others (its frailty, its dependence on trust and on our willingness to reveal ourselves) seem unbearable. Lived skepticism is when the very fact that the loved ones *are* separate – that they *have* minds of their own and *can* thus choose to close their minds to us, that they are in command of a love we need but they *can* withdraw, etc. – is experienced as terror. The problem here is *not* that one *does not know* whether others have (other) minds, or that one cannot know what they think. This was the skeptical problem about other minds in its intellectualized

[194] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 389. This in turn is related to a difference between external-world and other-minds skepticism: that the latter rather centers on best cases of acknowledgment than best cases of knowledge. However, I will not go into this difference here. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 420–440.

[195] See Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *Ling Lear*" and "Othello and the Stake of the Other," in *Disowning Knowledge*, pp. 39–123, 125–142.

form, in philosophy. In lived skepticism the problem is that one *knows too well* that the other has an independent mind, which also means that what he or she thinks (of you) is beyond your control – and yet you may deeply depend on what goes on in that mind. This is what gives reason to the avoidance of love: the terrifying conditions of love, its groundless existence.

All this suggests that in Cavell's reading of Shakespeare, tragedy returns us to the problem of knowing others in its unintellectualized form: when knowing the other is an existential, passionate, and moral drama, and the stakes are real. The feat of intimacy is not guaranteed and we cannot be sure that seeking acknowledgment and love will bear fruit. In this way, tragedy helps to reveal the bruising irony of skepticism too: "Skepticism meant to find the other, search others out with certainty. Instead it closes them out."[196]

2.1.4. Authority, Logic, and Projective Imagination

Even if I have continuously underscored that Cavell does not think one can *prove* the skeptic wrong, or claim to have (in principle) any more authority than the skeptic in saying what our words mean or what makes sense, what I have tried to *show,* by reconstructing Cavell's analyses and arguments, is how the skeptic *is* marred by confusion. But if this is not supposed to be proof then what is the status of these grammatical remarks or appeals to what *we* say and do not say? How can Cavell or I speak for *us*? Who are *us*? What right do we have to claim authority in saying what *we* mean and say?

Let me start addressing these questions by focusing on the relevance of the fact that these appeals to what "we" say, are supposed to be taken as *invitations*.[197] In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell writes:

> When Wittgenstein, or at this stage any philosopher appealing to the ordinary language, "says what we say", what he produces is not a generalization (though he may, later, generalize), but a (supposed) *instance* of what we say. We may think of it as a sample. The introduction of the sample by the words "We say…" is an invitation for you to see whether you have such a sample, or can accept mine as a sound one. One sample does not refute or disconfirm another; if two are in disagreement they vie with one another for the same confirmation. The only source of confirmation here is ourselves. And each of us is fully authoritative in this struggle. An initial disagreement may be overcome; it may turn out that we were producing samples of different things (e.g., imagining a situation differently) or that one of us had not looked carefully at the sample he had produced and only imagined that he wished to produce it, and then retracts or exchanges it. But if the disagreement persists, there is no appeal beyond us, or if beyond us two, then not beyond some eventual us. There is such a thing as intellectual tragedy. It is not a matter of

[196] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 84.
[197] "The question 'What should we say if…?' asked by the ordinary language philosopher, is an invitation which may be phrased this way: 'Suppose such and such were the case. What would we say?" Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 148.

> saying something false. Nor is it an inability or refusal to say something or to hear something, from which other tragedies may spring.[198]

The authority of my example of "what we say" is not based on whether or not we can, for instance, statistically and empirically verify that this is in fact how (most) people talk. Instead, both my proposed samples of what we say, as well as "the question 'What should we say if…?" constitute what Cavell calls "*invitation[s] to projective imagination*."[199] The kind of validation such statements and questions require is *acknowledgment*: when others acknowledge that what *I* say we say is, indeed, what *we* say. The way one accepts such an invitation is by using one's own projective imagination. If you give me an example of "what we say when," I will try to project the words you suggest in the context you provide and see if and how I can make sense of them. "Projective imagination" is thus nothing more and nothing less than a term describing our capacity to adequately put our grammatical criteria to work: our ability therefore to use words in new contexts.

However, this may appear a too subjective business to function as a trustworthy philosophical method of inquiry – how do we *know* that we will not go *wrong* in our projections, or make too wild projections? And if this procedure of projecting words into new contexts is supposed to be synonymous with our ability to use words meaningfully at all, then how do we *know* that our projections in general work or whether they accord with others'? In this context Cavell wants us to recall what he calls "two fundamental facts about human forms of life, and about the concepts formed in those forms: that any form of life and every concept integral to it has an indefinite number of instances and directions of projection; and that this variety is not arbitrary."[200] This means that even if there is no end to what new possible projections can be made, and even if we cannot determine *in advance* which ones will work (we will have to try them out, we cannot be language police), there will nevertheless be systematicity and logic to our projections in a shared language. Subjectivity is cultivated in language: not *anything* goes.

Cavell illustrates this point by giving some examples of the projection of the word "feed." If I put coins in the parking meter, give the lion some meat, throw crumbs of bread to the swan, and give the baby milk, these are all (in usual circumstances) actions of which it would make sense to project the word "feed" in order to describe: I feed the meter, I feed the lion, I feed the swan, I feed the baby. However, if I poured milk in the parking meter, stuffed coins into the baby's mouth, scattered bread crumbs in the lion's cage, and threw a dead pig at the swan, *none* of these actions would be (what we call) *feeding*.[201] The projection of the word "feed" would not work, would

[198] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 19.
[199] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 147. Cavell's italics.
[200] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 185.
[201] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 181–187.

not be accepted, as a description of these latter actions. We all know this, of course. These situations and actions do not invite or allow for the projection of that word.[202] Cavell writes:

> If words and phrases *must* recur (which means, as I put it, that they must be projected into new contexts, which means that new contexts must tolerate or invite that projection); and if there are no rules or universals which *insure* appropriate projection, but only our confirmed capacity to speak to one another; then a new projection, though not at first obviously appropriate, may be made appropriate by giving relevant explanation of how it is to be taken, *how* the new context *is* an instance of the old concept. If we are to communicate we mustn't leap too far; but how far is too far? If two masters of language disagree about the appropriateness of a projection, then it cannot be obvious who is right.[203]

If we disagree regarding some projections, and if disagreement persists, then who is authoritative to say who is right and who is wrong? This is perhaps what is most disappointing with our (grammatical) authority in projecting a word: that beyond us as native speakers of a language, there is no *other* or higher authority to appeal to in order to settle the matter. It may here be tempting to imagine that some *expert* authority, what I called Austinian authority, could relieve us of this burden and practical uncertainty by simply stating what is "correct." And of course in certain circumstances consulting a dictionary, or some other source for standards of "correctness," is the right way to address a disagreement, and will hopefully put an end to it. But such an authority cannot be what I consult, in order to validate my capacity to speak meaningfully *in general*:

> [Native s]peakers do not, in *general*, need evidence for what is said in the language; they are the source of such evidence. It is from them that the descriptive linguist takes the corpus of utterances on the basis of which he will construct a grammar of that language. To answer *some* kinds of specific questions, we will have to […] count noses; but in general to tell what is and isn't English, and to tell whether what is said is properly used, the native speaker can rely on his own nose; if not, there would be nothing to count.[204]

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[202] "[S]omething *does* follow from the fact that a term is used in its usual way: it entitles you (or, using the term, you entitle others) to make certain inferences, draw certain conclusions. (This is part of what your say when you say that you are talking about the *logic* of ordinary language.) *Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language*; no less a part than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk. Intimate understanding is understanding which is implicit." Stanley Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, pp. 11–12.

[203] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 192.

[204] Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?," p. 4.

So what happens if you try out my projections of a word – say the ones I made earlier about "pain" with regard to what "we" can meaningfully say about it? What if you try out my example of my sick grandfather, and about how the skeptic's response to it becomes a failure to mean something (a failure to successfully project the word "pain")? What if you do *not* acknowledge my projections or the conclusions I draw from them? Well, if you do not this can mean many different things: you may have missed something, or I may have failed in my description (or my understanding) of the problem (or the grammar). But what it does not do is to *prove* that I was wrong in appealing to "us" or "we." Since this "we" is an *invitational* "we," it is not vindicated or disqualified by the number of people (or noses) that acknowledge my appeal to a "we."

But these invitations to imaginatively try out a projection (of words and scenarios) are also *claims*; Cavell points out they are claims to *community*. So if you withhold your acknowledgment (and all other readers do too) then my claim to community (of being representative to speak for *us* in this matter) is denied.

> The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.[205]

At this point, I have already started to broach the problematic of meaning skepticism that will be the central topic for 2.2. However, before turning to it directly I would like to make one final point about what the consequences are if, as has been stated, there is no limit to possible new projections. Even if mature speakers of a language are equally authoritative with regard to using grammatical criteria and assessing projections, this open-endedness also means that there is no such thing as having mastered the language *once and for all*. There is no end to learning a language:

> [I]f there are always new contexts to be met, new words, new needs, new relationships, new objects, new perceptions to be recorded and shared, then perhaps it is as true of a master of a language as of his apprentice that though "in a sense" we learn the meaning of words and what objects are, the learning is never over, and we keep finding new potencies in words and in new ways in which objects are disclosed. The "routes of initiation" are never closed.[206]

[205] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 20.
[206] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 180.

Mature masters of a language will therefore at the same time be perpetual students of that language. And this will in fact be significant for my arguments about interpretive authority in chapter 3.

2.2. Conant on Cartesian and Kantian Skepticism. Meaning Skepticism and the Role of Interpretation in a Best Case of Meaning

After having mainly concerned myself with the argumentative structure of external-world- and other-minds skepticism beginning with a best case in the first part of this chapter, a question that I will now raise is the following: does Cavell's analysis of skepticism imply that skeptical reasoning *must* begin with a best case of knowledge? Or perhaps the question is better put this way: is *this* kind of skeptical problematic the *only* one Cavell addresses? Even if the best case of knowledge plays an important role in Cavell's analysis of skepticism, it is not Cavell's sole consideration. I believe a good point of departure both for exploring this further – and for initiating a discussion about the role of a best case in meaning skepticism – is James Conant's article "Varieties of Scepticism."

In this article Conant partly criticizes Cavell for limiting the sense of the term "skepticism" to only accommodate a reasoning that starts off with a best case of knowledge. According to the distinction Conant introduces – a distinction that separates out *Cartesian* from *Kantian* skepticism – only Cartesian skepticism supposes a best case. But while, according to Conant, the "term 'scepticism' in Cavell's work, exclusively denote[s] a problematic of the Cartesian variety,"[207] Cavell's distinction between questions of "*being* so" and "being *so*" are central for the way Conant spells out the very difference between his two varieties of skepticism. After, then, arguing that Cavell only accepts one of these two kinds of skepticism *as* skepticism, Conant nevertheless holds that Cavell in fact addresses *both* kinds in his work.[208]

Whether Conant is right, or to what extent he is right, in saying that Cavell only describes skepticism in Cartesian terms is not my main focus here. My main interest in Conant's article lies predominantly in how his distinction can help in my view to bring out significant features in Cavell's own thoughts on skepticism, in particular those characteristics that concern the role of a best case. It is especially with regard to *meaning skepticism*, I argue, that these two varieties (Cartesian and Kantian skepticism) will prove to have a peculiar, and unstable, relation. Furthermore, I will also interrogate the role "interpretation" serves in Conant's construal of a best case of know-

[207] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," p. 123.
[208] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism,"pp. 97–100, pp. 105–107.

ing meaning. These things in particular – the instability between the two varieties of meaning skepticism and the role of interpretation with regard to a best case of meaning – will be of great significance for my analysis of literary interpretive skepticism in chapter 3.

2.2.1. Cartesian and Kantian Skepticism

So what does Conant mean by the terms Cartesian and Kantian skepticism? An important thing to note is that the Cartesian and Kantian skeptical problematics are idealizations. The terms are construed to pick out two different kinds of problems, each of which is comprised by individual logics, in order to get a perspicuous overview of how different questions and concerns hang together with regard to skepticism. This means that the terms are not meant to identify certain philosophical *positions*, but rather two different *dialectical spaces* in which representatives of quite diverse philosophical views (with regard to skepticism) can be identified. Furthermore, Conant's terms are *not* supposed to specify a skeptical problematic inherent in, or addressed by, Descartes and Kant. In fact, Conant thinks that both philosophers were to some extent concerned with both varieties.[209] Instead, the two varieties are separated through their respective concerns and questions: while the Cartesian (not Descartes's) skeptical problematic centers on questions about *truth* and *knowledge*, the Kantian (not Kant's) skeptical problematic is concerned with how knowledge claims – true *or* false – are possible at all. Another important thing to take into account here is that a philosopher can very well be investigating one or both of these *problematics* without being a skeptic of either sort. So while the terms "Cartesian skeptic" and "Kantian skeptic" are denoting *skeptics* (be they straightforward skeptics or skeptical twins) of a certain variety, a philosopher who works with a Cartesian or Kantian skeptical *problematic* need not be a skeptic at all. A good example of such a philosopher would be Cavell.

Conant elucidates these two varieties in the following way: the *Cartesian problematic* centers on the kind of questions that Cavell describes as questions of "*being* so," questions of existence, realness and truth. The *Cartesian skeptic* struggles to overcome a conceived *gap* between appearances and reality, asking how and whether we can ever know that things are as they seem or whether they even exist. This variety of skepticism starts with a *best case of knowledge*: it begins with a concrete, and best, claim to *truth*. If the best case is shown to be vulnerable to doubt, the doubt generalizes into full blown Cartesian skepticism – If I do not know this, then what can I ever know? The discovery the Cartesian skeptic takes him- or herself to have made results in a mood of *disappointment*: something that the Cartesian skeptic thought was *possible* to know turns out to be *actually* unknowable.

[209] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 97–98.

What the Cartesian skeptic does not worry about is the very intelligibility of his or her own reasoning. That both the initial (best case) claim, the doubt itself, as well as the ensuing skeptical conclusion (that we cannot know after all), make sense, and objectively so, are things the Cartesian skeptic takes for granted. So while the Cartesian skeptic will admit that the doubt is *practically unstable* – that one must live one's daily life *as if* there is no gap between the unknown reality and its appearances – the doubt itself is taken to be perfectly *stable on a theoretical level*: as the "perfectly intelligible outcome to an intellectual enquiry."[210]

The Kantian problematic, on the other hand, has its qualms precisely about those matters the Cartesian skeptic takes for granted. Where the Cartesian skeptic worries about whether knowledge claims are *actually* possible to verify, and thus asking about the grounds for truth and knowledge, the Kantian skeptic worries about the very *possibility* of formulating anything that would even count as having the unity and intelligibility of a thought at all. The Kantian skeptic is just as puzzled by the conceivability and intentionality of a dream, an illusion, and false beliefs, as by the possibility of having a real experience, trustworthy sense perception, or true knowledge. A skeptical question of the Kantian kind is: What are the grounds for having *thought content* – true or false – at all? This worry therefore operates on the *grammatical* or Wittgensteinian level, on the level of *criteria*. The Kantian skeptic addresses worries about the possibility and conditions of something "being *so*".

In contradistinction to the Cartesian skeptic, this worry does *not* begin with a best case of knowledge. It cannot start with a particular claim or case since it is precisely *the very possibility* of there being such a unified and individualized thing as a *specific* thought content, idea, experience – the very identity and conceivability of it – that is at stake in this problematic. The Kantian gap to be bridged is not between illusion, dream, falsity on the one hand, and facts, reality and truth on the other – but between an unintelligible chaos – a *nothing* – and an intelligible, specific, *something*. For there to even be such a thing as a thought, or an experience over which one could raise (Cartesian) doubt, the Kantian gap must already be closed: this something must already be sufficiently stable to be conceived of as vulnerable to doubt.

The Kantian "doubt" is therefore not, Conant points out, a doubt proper, but a kind of conceptual blur or decay that falls apart under its own inconceivability. Not only is it practically unstable, as the Cartesian doubt is, it is also *theoretically unstable*. It leaves the Kantian skeptic with a bewilderingly

[210] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 110, pp. 107–110. I will return to this. The Cartesian doubt is in fact *not* theoretically stable, at least this is how I read Cavell. To my mind Cavell thinks that following Cartesian skepticism through, denying a best case *is – ultimately* – embracing what Conant calls Kantian skepticism. Cartesian skepticism only *looks* theoretically stable if one halts the process. The Cartesian skeptic *thinks* he knows what he means in his doubt, but he actually does not.

empty feeling of despair and mystification: if no ground can be given for the possibility of something "being *so*" at all, the very possibility of thought *überhaupt* seems to vanish into nothingness: "It no longer looks as there is something we cannot do [or know, as in Cartesian skepticism], now it looks as if there is *nothing to do* (not even dream)."[211] If Cartesian skepticism results in disappointment, the Kantian ends up in "a boggle."[212]

However, this instability raises the question as to whether Kantian skepticism should be seen as a species of *skepticism* at all? Conant touches upon that question in the following passage where he writes:

> What makes someone such-and-such a sort of Cartesian sceptic is that he is exercised by a *doubt* regarding whether we can have *knowledge* of such and such a sort. […] The Kantian problematic is […] only optionally clothed in epistemological form. It is, at its root, of a more general nature and the worry that exercises such a sceptic is misunderstood if it is taken to turn exclusively on matters having to do with knowledge. What comes into view in a Kantian problematic under the initial heading of 'the conditions of knowledge' are the conditions of mindedness as such. […] The Kantian sceptic is therefore only inaptly characterized as someone who suffers from a *doubt.* This will seem to some philosophers to constitute a sufficient ground for insisting that what I am calling 'a Kantian sceptic' is not a kind of sceptic at all.[213]

What I find most valuable in Conant's discussion is the way he shows that Kantian skepticism and the Kantian problematic can be both produced and addressed in and of itself – that it does not have to start with a Cartesian doubt and a best case of knowledge. This is something that will be significant for my investigation into interpretive skepticism.

However, related to the question of Kantian skepticism's status *as* skepticism, there might be space for disagreement between Conant and I. This point of disagreement would not regard whether Kantian skepticism should be seen as skepticism – because I agree that it clearly should – but rather *why* it should, especially with respect to its relation to Cartesian skepticism. This in turn has to do with the question whether, or to what extent, the Kantian and Cartesian skeptical problematic should be seen as *separate*: as containing separate logics. And this question in turn has to do with how one reads Cavell and how one understands his account of what happens when a best case is rejected. I will devote the next section to a straightening out of the consequences that subtend the possible disagreement existing between Conant and I on these issues.

[211] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 111, 111–117.
[212] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 111–112.
[213] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 104–105.

2.2.2. Cartesian and Kantian Skepticism as Exhibiting Distinct Logics or Logical Stages in a Common Problematic

The possible disagreement between Conant and I revolves around the matter of whether, or to what extent, the two kinds of skepticism he has distinguished should be considered as being *separate*, as comprised of different logics. I think Conant has demonstrated quite convincingly that one can go directly into the problematic of Kantian skepticism – by asking skeptical questions of the Kantian variety – without troubling oneself with the skeptical questions of the Cartesian kind. However, I do not see how one could enter a Cartesian skeptical problematic and follow it to its logical, skeptical, conclusion without being *forced* (regardless of whether one realizes this or not) to enter a Kantian skeptical problematic as well. As I understand Cavell, his point is precisely that Cartesian doubt (as Conant names it), which starts with a best case of knowledge, *must* – if it is followed through to its logical end point – result in what Conant calls Kantian skepticism. In my view, and as I tried to demonstrate in 2.1, the rejection of a best case results, for Cavell, in a rejection of grammatical criteria and thereby in the very annihilation of sense which Conant calls a "Kantian boggle."[214]

In saying this, I am of course not asserting that all philosophers, who have been entangled in the Cartesian variety of skepticism *actually* have followed it to its Kantian end point. They may not have noticed that their "theoretically stable" but "practically unstable" doubt is – and this is my claim – theoretically unstable *too*, if followed through. All I am saying is that, if one agrees with Cavell's analysis here, such skeptics *should* have ended up in a Kantian problematic too. The Cartesian skeptic who begins his or her reasoning with a best case of knowledge runs into the dilemma of trying to make a knowledge claim in a non-claim context. In that situation it becomes obscure *what* he or she is trying to claim. The Cartesian skeptical conclusion is precisely the point at which the intelligibility of the Cartesian doubt itself be-

[214] As it happens, I am not at all sure whether I *do* disagree with Conant here, either in my reading of Cavell on this point, or in my understanding of the internal relationship between the logics of Cartesian and Kantian skepticism. What gives the impression that Conant really thinks that the logics are separate, and in a sense I find problematic – in a sense that *both* kinds of skepticism could as it were exist on their own, i.e. without Cartesian skepticism necessarily turning into Kantian (*if its logical consequences are worked out*) – are sections like this: "Each [variety] has its own logic. The co-occurrence of such features within a single philosophical discussion is generally (though not necessarily) a symptom of philosophical confusion on the part of an author […]. Cartesian and Kantian features will tend to drive one another out – in the irresoluteness of actual philosophical practice, such features can often be found squashed up against one another." "Varieties of Scepticism," p. 106. Saying that the two kinds tend to drive each other out, and that the mixture of the two suggests a confusion on the philosophers part, can indicate that Conant considers them to be more strictly logically separate than I do: that the Cartesian problematic does not necessarily bring with it the Kantian one. On the other hand Conant is well aware that the Cartesian problematic *can* turn into the Kantian one, see for instance "Varieties of Scepticism," note 35, p. 135. So I am not at all sure whether there is a disagreement here or not.

comes dubious, which means that it is also the juncture at which a question of "*being* so" turns into a question of "being *so*": the route of the Cartesian problematic of realness and truth flows into a Kantian problematic surrounding intelligibility. A succinct example of this can be found in *The Claim of Reason*; skeptical reasoning begins with a "best case" of knowing that someone else is in pain, in this case knowing that someone has a toothache. Cavell writes:

> But there are cases in which a man is for all the world having a toothache, optimal cases: *I* am sure (I know what the word means), and it is a perfect example (I've checked). My feeling here is: If *that* isn't – if he isn't having – a toothache, I don't know what a toothache is.[215]

> But what *is* the doubt now? That he is actually suffering. But in the face of *that* doubt, *in the presence of full criteria*, it is desperate to continue: "I'm justified in saying: I'm almost certain." My feeling is: there is nothing any longer to be almost certain about. I've gone the route of certainty. Certainty itself hasn't taken me far enough. And to say now: "But that is what we call having a toothache" would be mere babbling in my condition. The only thing that could conceivably have been called "his having a toothache" – his actual horror itself – has dropped out, withdrawn beyond my reach. – Was it always beyond me? Or is my condition to be understood some other way? (What is my condition? Is it doubt? It is in any case expressed here by speechlessness.)[216]

In the two quotes above, Cavell invites us to use our projective imagination to try out what happens to our own understanding of what a toothache *is* when a best case is rejected – what becomes of the "being *so*" of the toothache? The rejection of the best case was supposed to lead to Cartesian skepticism: that I can never know if someone is in pain. If I do not know that *this man* really has a toothache, I cannot know when *anyone* has a toothache (or more generally: when anybody is in pain). But the interesting thing here is that this Cartesian skeptical conclusion (or moral) – i.e. that I cannot separate a real or true toothache from a fake or unreal one, so I can never tell when someone is really in pain or not – is also the moment when the Cartesian problematic turns into a Kantian one about the "being *so*," the criteria, identity, and possibility of *toothaches*: "If *that isn't* – if he isn't having – a toothache, I don't know what a toothache is." The Cartesian skeptical conclusion transforms into the Kantian difficulty that I no longer seem to know what a toothache *is*: its very identity as a specific something drops out of the picture, it is "beyond my reach." So when Cavell writes: "[w]hat is my condition? Is it doubt? It is in any case expressed here by speechlessness," I think Cavell expresses exactly what Conant called the *Kantian boggle*: that

[215] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 69.
[216] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 70.

the "doubt" itself starts to disintegrate and crumbles into something inconceivable since the very *thing* being doubted disintegrates. Trying to speak of toothaches now will only result in mere "babbling."

If I am right here then this also explains how Conant can register that Cavell addresses problems of the Kantian variety without actually *calling* this problematic a separate "skepticism." Because as I read Cavell, a skeptic ending up with Cartesian skepticism is *inevitably* also dealing with what Conant calls Kantian skepticism – even if he or she does not *realize* it – since Cartesian skepticism is, as I would like to describe it, already *pregnant with* the Kantian boggle.

2.2.3. The Unstable Relationship between the Cartesian and Kantian Varieties of Meaning or Language Skepticism

Cavell's toothache case is not just a good example of when a Cartesian doubt (starting with a best case, about whether I *really* know that this man has a toothache) turns into a Kantian "doubt" (a situation where the very sense of my doubt falls apart for me). It also provides a good starting point to investigate how a best case works slightly *differently* in meaning skepticism, other-minds skepticism and external-world skepticism.

According to Conant, the division between Kantian and Cartesian skepticism cuts through all three areas of skepticism that have been mentioned so far: skepticism concerning the external world, skepticism of other minds, and meaning/language skepticism.[217] On Conant's account it appears equally plausible to find, in all three areas, examples of both Cartesian skepticism, which starts with a best case of knowledge, and Kantian skepticism, which does not start with a best case. Regarding external-world- and other-minds-skepticism I am prepared to agree. In these two "areas" it is conceivable that a Cartesian skeptic can halt at the stage of the Cartesian skeptical conclusion without noticing that it leads him or her into a Kantian problematic as well. It is not unrealistic to accept that the skeptic or the epistemologist in these cases *thinks* that Cartesian doubt is theoretically stable and therefore does not see how it culminates in Kantian skeptical "doubt."

However, I argue that something interesting and different happens when one tries to proceed in the same way by separating Cartesian and Kantian *meaning skepticism*. Here there are two things I will focus on: First, whether the distinction between Cartesian and Kantian varieties of skepticism can be worked out as clearly and easily in meaning skepticism as in other-minds and external-world skepticism; and second what is the significance of Conant's decision to speak of *interpretations* while discussing meaning skepti-

[217] In his article Conant investigates them under the headings "Philosophy of perception," "The problem of other minds," and "Philosophy of Language." Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 100–102.

cism, and the role interpretation plays in construing a "best case" of knowing meaning in the Cartesian variety of meaning skepticism. I will focus on the first of these two questions in this section, and discuss the second in the next.

In fleshing out the difference between Cartesian and Kantian meaning skepticism Conant writes as follows:

> The Cartesian version of this problem goes like this: how can I *know* that my interpretation of something (a text, an utterance, a sign-post) is correct? How can I be sure that this is what is *really* meant? I know this sort of sign-post (in the shape, say, of a pointing arrow) is usually to be interpreted, but how do I know that my interpretation in this case is the right interpretation? But if I don't know *this*, how can I ever be said to know what something means? The gap that the Cartesian seeks to bridge here is between his understanding of the meaning of the sign and what the sign actually means. This version of the Cartesian sceptic asks: how can I penetrate the penumbra of interpretation and attain a view of the meaning itself? This version of the Kantian sceptic again is preoccupied by a different question: how can a sequence of marks or noises so much as seem to *mean* something? The Kantian paradox here lies in its coming to seem a mystery how a mere sequence of dead signs could so much as *appear* to be alive with significance.[218]

Let me start to describe how I think the Cartesian/Kantian distinction works slightly differently in meaning skepticism by once more returning to the issue of whether, or to what extent, one should view Cartesian and Kantian skepticism as really exhibiting two *separate* logics. It is particularly in the light of this issue that I question whether meaning-, other-minds, and external-world skepticism can be divided and stratified *in the same way* according to these two logics. As I said before, while I think that Kantian skepticism can be invoked in itself, I read Cavell as suggesting that the Cartesian variant inevitably leads to the Kantian variety – *if its logical consequences are worked out*.

Thus, to me, as I said in the previous section, the two varieties rather represent two different *stages* of skeptical reasoning in which you do not need to entertain the first stage (Cartesian) in order to enter the second (Kantian). But if you do embrace the first stage you will inevitably end up in the second as well, so long as you follow your reasoning through. Thus the purported difference between Cartesian doubt as *theoretically stable* and Kantian doubt as *theoretically unstable* turns out to be an illusory one. The illusion of this distinction depends on the possibility of *halting* the Cartesian reasoning before it leaves the Cartesian stage, not following it through to its Kantian end point.

Now, this illusion of meaningfulness on the level of Cartesian doubt – an illusion that endures as long as one imagines oneself to be able to stop at the Cartesian stage – I would say *invites itself more freely* in the case of exter-

[218] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 101–102.

nal-world skepticism and other-minds skepticism than in meaning skepticism. It is easier *to imagine* that we know what we mean when we claim to "doubt" (in the manner of the Cartesian skeptic) whether we can ever know what others think and feel, or what the world is really like, than when we claim to "doubt" whether we ever know what we mean. Why is this so? Well, in the case of meaning skepticism the distinction between the Cartesian skeptical conclusion that we can *never* know, on the one hand, and the Kantian doubt concerning criteria, on the other, seems to collapse immediately. If I doubt whether I can ever know the true meaning of words (the Cartesian skeptical conclusion), how could this "doubt" not instantly backfire on my own doubt and the conceivability of my own question (which is a Kantian problematic)? The moment I utter and understand my "doubt," how can I still trust myself to understand the very doubt I have just articulated? How can that even *seem* like a stable doubt? Here the paradox is not even hidden. How, then, could I even *try* to halt at the level of Cartesian skepticism?

What I think Conant shows very clearly is that meaning skepticism renders more unstable the distinction between Kantian and Cartesian skepticism in a way that is not necessarily the case in the other two areas of skepticism – precisely because *Kantian skepticism itself is meaning skepticism*: it is skepticism regarding grammatical criteria and "being *so*." By this I do not wish to deny that there can be, and have been, cases of Cartesian meaning skepticism in the sense that meaning skepticism might indeed *start* with a best case of meaning. However, this Cartesian doubt is not stable *as* Cartesian doubt. The moment the best case of meaning is rejected and the Cartesian skeptical conclusion is reached (that we can never be sure about the meaning of our words) the doubt transforms into Kantian doubt by simultaneously questioning its own conceivability and conditions of possibility. What happens at the Kantian stage of the skeptical reasoning is that the covert nonsense at play in the Cartesian stage turns into overt nonsense. The doubt itself, if followed through, dissolves itself. We are then left with bewilderment, with not really knowing what we are asking anymore. Not because there is a *something* we are asking (we just do not know what it is) but because there is really *nothing* we are asking.

2.2.4. Meaning Skepticism and the Role of Interpretation in a "Best Case." Kripke's Meaning Skepticism and the Infinite Regress of Interpretation

Even if the distinction between Cartesian and Kantian skepticism collapses immediately in the case of meaning skepticism, nonetheless I agree with Conant that meaning skepticism can *begin* in a Cartesian problematic and a

best case of knowing meaning.[219] Let me therefore now turn to the interesting fact that when Conant characterizes Cartesian meaning skepticism, he construes the instance of a best case as an instance of *interpretation*. Conant describes the procedure of the Cartesian problematic of meaning skepticism thus:

> [H]ow can I *know* that my interpretation of something (a text, an utterance, a sign-post) is correct? How can I be sure that this is what is *really* meant? I know how this sort of sign-post (in the shape, say, of a pointing arrow) is usually to be interpreted, but how do I know that my interpretation in this case is the right interpretation? But if I don't know *this*, how can I ever be said to know what something means?[220]

Now, what I suppose a reader of Cavell would immediately ask here is why an instance of *interpretation* is chosen as a best case of knowing meaning in the first place? One might have expected that in order to create a *best* case of knowing meaning – where doubt and uncertainty seem (at least initially) clearly out of question – Conant would have picked an example of understanding meaning that is so immediately obvious it requires no preceding interpretive effort. Possible candidates for such "best cases" could have been "Pass me the salt, please." uttered in a perfectly unambiguous context (say, when we sit down and have dinner) so that we would be in no doubt about its meaning. Or it could have been a simple rule such as the rule of addition, or something of that kind.

Why, though, is the best case of meaning, which leads to meaning skepticism if rejected, construed as a case of *interpretation* in Conant's account of the Cartesian variety of meaning skepticism? I think this can be explained if one looks at a particular example of meaning skepticism that Conant addresses. Later in the article, Conant discusses Saul Kripke, and Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein's comments on rule-following and private language.[221] In order then to get a clearer understanding of the relation between a best case of meaning and the role of interpretation in meaning skepticism, let me now turn to the illustrative example of Kripke.

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[219] However, it is precisely part of my point that meaning skepticism works differently than the other two forms, in the sense that "knowing meanings" (i.e. having a language, knowing grammatical criteria) is *not* on a par with knowing facts or knowing how things are. Having a language and knowing meanings is a precondition for knowing facts. In the case of other-minds skepticism we can separate the question of knowing (or not knowing) *that* someone has a toothache (Cartesian problematic) from knowing *what* a toothache is at all, knowing the criteria – what it would be for something to be a toothache – the meaning of "toothache" (Kantian problematic). Whereas in meaning skepticism if you know *that* this word "toothache" means *toothache* – your very knowing (or not knowing) *that* this is so – the presumably Cartesian problematic – *is* nothing more and nothing less than you being authoritative in having (or not having) the grammatical criteria of "toothache" – which is a concern on the Kantian level.

[220] Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," p. 101.

[221] See Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," pp. 122–124.

In his famous (or infamous) *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982), Saul Kripke argues that Wittgenstein ends up with a "skeptical solution" to the problem of knowing and determining meaning in language. Kripke approaches the problem of meaning skepticism through what he calls the "Wittgensteinian paradox" in *Philosophical Investigation* §201, namely that "no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule."[222] Kripke wants to show that what he sees as Wittgenstein's skeptical solution to this paradox "is principally to be explicated in the terms of the problem of 'following a rule'."[223] Since innumerable interpretations could be made of a rule, which all would seem to be in accordance with it, and since every interpretation in turn could be interpreted one way or another, there seems to be no end to the process of possible, consecutive, interpretations. Therefore, Kripke argues, there is no way of knowing when we have finally reached the real or true meaning of the rule: we will never know the *real* or *true* meaning.

What is interesting here is that Kripke begins his skeptical argument quite clearly, I think, by introducing a typical Cartesian *best case* – here a best case of knowing meaning.[224] And the case has the force of a best case, I ar-

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[222] Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 7.

[223] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. vii.

[224] In arguing this I will disagree or appear to disagree with Conant. I am not sure. He writes on Kripke's meaning skepticism that "whatever Cartesian features the paradox might initially appear to possess belong not properly to it but rather merely to the initial motivating (but also misleading) exposition of it (according to which 'the problem may appear to be epistemological')". Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," p. 122. I think that our different, or at least possibly different, views on this, once again boils down to the question of in which way Cartesian and Kantian skepticism can be said to display *separate* logics. I take Conant's stress here on the Kantian nature of Kripke's problem, and the playing down of its initial Cartesian phase, to in part stem from his wish to show how these two logics are distinct – and him wanting to show that Cavell is concerned with Cartesian skepticism and Kripke with Kantian skepticism. Thus, he conversely plays down Cavell's occupation with the Kantian problematic and even goes so far to say that Cavell should find it hard to "recognize the problematic that Kripke calls one of 'scepticism' to be a variety of scepticism at all", Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," p.123. I am not convinced by this, neither that Kripke is not beginning significantly with a best case, nor that Cavell cannot see Kripke as dealing with a skeptical issue he himself addresses. In Cavell's "The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and Kripke," *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The Carus Lectures, 1988 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 64–100, Cavell discusses Kripke in a way which makes it quite clear, in my view, that he is very aware of the Kantian *skeptical* problematic (as Conant calls it) in both Kripke and Wittgenstein. As I have already said, I think that Cavell *does* address the Kantian problematic *by* considering it to be a problematic that the Cartesian skeptic will end up with if he or she follows that reasoning to its logical end point. Actually, I think Conant rather strengthens my point on this when he tries to show how Cavell is occupied with Cartesian skepticism *as opposed* to Kantian skepticism. He writes: "When Cavell […] pauses to list (what he calls) 'three phenomenologically striking features of the conclusion which characterizes scepticism', what he goes on to cite are clearly features of (what I have been calling) Cartesian skepticism: (1) 'the sense of *discovery* expressed in the conclusion of the investigation'; (2) 'the sense of *conflict* of this discovery with our ordinary "beliefs"'; and (3) ' the *instability* of the discovery, the theoretical convic-

gue, precisely because it is *not initially* understood as an instance of interpretation! Instead, it is part of the Cartesian *skeptical feat* to *make* us think of it *as* an instance of interpretation (that goes on infinitely). Kripke's Cartesian best case is the rule of addition. That it is supposed to work as a best case – as an instance of meaning which all mature language users understand – seems evident as he writes: "I, like almost all other English speakers, use the word 'plus' and the symbol '+' to denote the well-known mathematical function addition."[225] Kripke is also explicit regarding what is at stake with the rule of addition: "I will develop the problem initially with respect to a mathematical example, though the relevant skeptical problem applies to all meaningful uses of language."[226] Following the rule of addition is thus supposed to be taken as a procedure isomorphic with the capacity of being able to use, or project, words in new contexts. If Kripke can make us doubt our capacity to follow the rule of addition, then the conclusion that we cannot know meaning in this best case leads to the ensuing skeptical conclusion that we can never be sure that we understand language and meaning correctly.

So how does Kripke invoke doubt among *us* who supposedly know what addition is? Suppose, Kripke writes, that he would "encounter a bizarre sceptic". This skeptic asks Kripke how he *knows* that he is following the rule of addition? Say that Kripke encounters a new computation: 68+57. In this particular case, how does Kripke know that the result of that computation should really be 125 (as anyone who knows how to add would think) and not, say, 5?[227] Suppose, the skeptic says, that when Kripke until now thought he was using the rule of addition, he had only added numbers smaller than 57. If so, how can he know that he did not *actually* use the function of "quus" instead? "Quus" is then defined as being the rule of addition (as we know it) as long as the numbers are smaller than 57, including the stipulation that if the numbers are larger than 57 the result is always 5. If Kripke was instead using the function "quus" the result of 68+57 would not be 125 but 5. "Who is to say," Kripke asks, "that this is not the function I previously meant by '+'?"[228] How does he know himself that he did *not* interpret "+" as meaning "quus"?

The problem, Kripke argues, is that even if "the sceptic's suggestion is obviously insane," there seem to be no "fact about my past usage that can be

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tion it inspires vanishing under the pressure (or distraction) of our ordinary commerce with the world' (Cavell 1979: 129).", Conant, "Varieties of Scepticism," p. 122. What I take these three phenomenologically characteristics to show is that (1) and (2) are indeed part of the Cartesian problematic but they also lead to (3) where the theoretical instability presents itself. That is, while Conant seems to read (3) as speaking of the *practical* instability of the Cartesian skepticism, I read (3) as expressing the *theoretical* instability of a Kantian problematic, with which the Cartesian skepticism was all the time pregnant.

[225] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 7.

[226] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 7.

[227] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 8.

[228] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 9.

cited to refute it."[229] And he continues: "if there can be no fact about which particular function I meant in the *past*, there can be none in the *present* either."[230] If there is no *fact* guaranteeing that my application of the rule in each new instance is an application of *that* rule, and not some strange *interpretation* of it, then we end up with the Cartesian skeptical conclusion that we cannot ever know what we mean: "There can be no fact as to what I mean by 'plus', or any other word at any time" – and – "Indeed, there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning a definite function by 'plus' (which determines my responses in new cases) and my meaning nothing at all."[231] Therefore, according to Kripke,

> [t]he skeptical argument, then, remains unanswered. There can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word. Each new application we make is a leap in the dark; any present intention could be interpreted so as to accord with anything we may choose to do. So there can be neither accord, nor conflict. This is what Wittgenstein said in § 202.[232]

I think Kripke's argument shows how it becomes *impossible* in meaning skepticism to keep apart the Cartesian skeptical conclusion from the Kantian boggle – because this conclusion is simultaneously a Cartesian skeptical conclusion *and* a Kantian skeptical conclusion (a "boggle"). When Kripke reaches the Cartesian skeptical conclusion that there is no way of separating the *real* meaning from a *misinterpretation* of it – when he says there is "no such thing as meaning anything by a word," which is also to say that the distinction between correct and incorrect understanding becomes unknowable and thus unsubstantial – this is a conclusion which simultaneously results in a Kantian boggle, in "something of an eerie feeling," as if "the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air."[233] However, is this really what Wittgenstein says? Let me cite §§201–202 of *Philosophical Investigations*:

> 201. This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because any course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if *any* action can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.
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> It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contended us at least for the moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying a rule" and "going against it" in actual cases. Hence there is an inclination

[229] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, pp. 8–9.
[230] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 13.
[231] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 21.
[232] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 55.
[233] Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 55, pp. 21–22.

> to say: any action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term "interpretation" to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.
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> 202. And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.[234]

If anything, it would seem as if Wittgenstein is rather saying the *opposite* of what Kripke claims. When Wittgenstein writes that "[i]t can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another," what he takes the paradox to reveal, is instead that *the very picture* of the understanding of language as consisting of endless successions of interpretations, is what *causes* the skeptical conclusion. The picture itself is the source of the confusion. What the paradoxical situation shows instead is that "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*."

This further strengthens my idea that the way *interpretation* relates to Cartesian meaning skepticism and its best case, is not that the skeptic *begins* with a best case of meaning in the form of a best case of interpretation. Rather, the Cartesian variety begins with a best case of meaning which must *not* be a case of interpretation, or at least not initially be seen as one. The way uncertainty and doubt over this best case is introduced, is through the skeptic's effort to *make* us think of it *as* an instance of interpretation as well. By making us see even the *best* case of understanding meaning as requiring interpretive effort, the contrast between cases where we *immediately* understand meaning and others in which interpretation is *needed* to understand, is denied. The only difference between the *easy cases* and the *hard cases* according to the skeptic would then be that in the former we do not notice that we *are* interpreting too.

2.2.5. Cavell's Response to Kripke's Meaning Skepticism

Let me now turn to how Cavell understands Kripke's skeptical argument and how Cavell's understanding can be discussed in terms of the Cartesian and Kantian problematic. Kripke asks the typical Cartesian question of how we can *know* whether we *really* mean "plus" or "quus." He furthermore conceives of that question as being a question about some *fact*, a question operating on the dichotomy of truth and falsity. In the following quote Cavell diagnoses this conceptualization as instead constituting a particular philosophical *requirement* in Kripke, and he writes:

[234] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 201–202, p. 69e.

> In […] coming upon a derivation of some of the language of Kripke's formulation – "there was [and is] no *fact* about me that constituted my having meant [or meaning]" […] – I am surely struck by its truth and gravity. But I find that I do not wish to draw a skeptical conclusion from that insight, something to the effect that I do not know what I mean, or whether I mean one thing rather than another, or mean anything at all. […] One reason I resist a skeptical moral here is perhaps that I do not know, as it were, whether or how meaning something requires there to be a fact about me that constitute meaning it: What is not there when there is no fact? […] Kripke takes the discovery of the absence of his fact to be itself a fact, to have (eventually) that stability. Whereas I take this "absence of the fact" not as a (skeptical) discovery but as the skeptic's *requirement*. […] I said I cannot say that I am – think myself to be – wrong at the level of grounding, wrong in general in the words I use, wrong in presenting myself as representative of meaningful speech. Can I nevertheless say that I am right, though without justification? (Cf. *Investigations,* §289; Kripke, p. 87.) Not exactly. But if to say, "This is simply what I do" is not necessarily to say, "I am right," it may mean something like, "Follow me, I am the way" – which is hardly less immodest[235]

Cavell does not dispute Kripke's claim that there is no *fact* guaranteeing that I meant a certain thing, or that no fact secures the adequate understanding of language and meaning in general. He acknowledges the truth in this, the truth in meaning skepticism, if you like. However, Cavell does not, like Kripke, take this "absence of a fact" to itself constitute a fact about some real and substantial *lack* (now threatening meaning as such if not redeemed). He does not draw the same skeptical *moral* from having followed the skeptic (Kripke) to his Kantian boggle. Why? Because it is simply not clear what such a proposed "fact" would be. The problem Kripke deals with takes place on the Kantian level of conceivability – not the Cartesian level of facts, truth and falsity. The "it" Kripke takes himself to be *missing* itself lacks the conceptual "stability" Kripke imagines "it" to have. Is Cavell then right and Kripke wrong? This is not the best way to pose the question, and for the very same reason: the question is not a Cartesian one about truth and falsity, about right and wrong, but a Kantian question of conceivability and meaningfulness. The question is instead who succeeds in making sense.

As the quote above suggests, I think it is appropriate to describe the difference between Cavell and Kripke as the difference between two philosophers who go through the very same skeptical reasoning but draw different morals from the skeptical conclusions such reasoning leads up to. Having followed the Cartesian skepticism to its Cartesian and Kantian skeptical conclusion, both Cavell and Kripke end up in the same Kantian boggle of inconceivability and speechlessness: Kripke with an eerie feeling of meaning evaporating in its totality, Cavell (in his toothache example) with not knowing what the phenomenon under doubt *is* anymore, babbling in the face of it.

[235] Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and Kripke," pp. 76–77.

Both are left at a place where it now becomes a mystery how we can even do so much as *think*, falsely or truthfully, at all (about meaning in Kripke's case, and about pain in Cavell's case).

But while the Kantian skeptic of Kripke *remains* locked inside that condition of despair, as if paralyzed by the madness it invites, seeing it as the philosophical *result* or end point, Cavell (and Wittgenstein) take this, on the other hand, as *exposing* a philosophical confusion that we hopefully are then able to leave behind us. The Cavellian philosopher who wishes to show how the skeptic is confused *must* him- or herself go through that skeptical reasoning – that is the only way to take the skeptic seriously in the right way. He or she must try to understand the skeptic by working out the skeptical thought to its logical end point. That is what it means to turn "covert nonsense" into "overt nonsense" – it has to be done from the inside. But what sets Cavell apart from the Kantian skeptic, when they both have done so, *is the moral he draws from having followed it through.* If we end up in a Kantian boggle, if it now seem as if there is "*nothing to do* (not even dream)," if we no longer know what we mean with what we say – then the moral to be drawn is that there is evidently something *confused* with the very question and the reasoning that has led us there. We no longer know what we mean – true – but not because there is a meaning *there* we lack access to, but because *we* have not meant something specific.

Asking questions on a transcendental level – in terms of intelligibility and conditions of possibility – does not turn anyone into a Kantian *skeptic*. What makes the Kantian skeptic a *skeptic* is that he or she does not only ask *how* something is possible (while taking this thing to be both possible and actual). It is when the question of *how* something is possible is fused with the question of *whether* it really *is* possible, that is, a question posed in order to guarantee *that* this thing is possible. Therefore, the meaning skeptic is not merely asking transcendental questions on the Kantian level of *how* meaning is possible (what are its conditions of possibility?) but tries to introduce doubt (or "doubt") on a transcendental level. He or she actually *tries* to ask *whether* meaning is possible. And in reaching a negative answer to that question (that it is *not* possible), both the question and the answer fall apart into *nothing* – into nonsense.

Chapter 3: Interpretive Skepticism

> When philosophers use a word – "knowledge", "being", object", "I", "proposition", "name" – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home? –
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> What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.[236]

> Take another example: Socrates' question "What is knowledge?" […] As the problem is put, it seems that there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word "knowledge". It appears we don't know what it means, and therefore, perhaps, we have no right to use it. […] Many words in this sense then don't have a strict meaning. But this is not a defect. To think it is would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary.[237]

At the end of last chapter, I explored the particularity of meaning skepticism in the Cavellian idiom through a reading of James Conant's paper "Varieties of Scepticism," and by looking at Cavell's response to Saul Kripke's skeptical understanding of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following. I noted a peculiar instability with regard to meaning skepticism in its Cartesian and Kantian varieties, and also that Kripke (as well as Conant) significantly created a skeptical "best case" of understanding meaning by construing it as an instance of *interpretation*. It is now time to sort out what possible consequences this may have for the problem of skepticism about *literary interpretation* as such. Furthermore, it is time to reestablish contact with those theoretical debates I recounted in chapter 1, which I claimed could harbor hidden or invisible interpretive skepticism. There are several important issues that now need to be addressed.

If interpretive skepticism is to be considered a version, or subgenre of a more general meaning skepticism – the purpose of literary interpretation being after all, in one sense or another, presumably to understand what a literary work can, or does, *mean* – what should one make of the role that interpretation played in Kripke's construal of a best case of meaning skepti-

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[236] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 116, p. 41e.

[237] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations,"* (1958) (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), pp. 26–27.

cism? Does it somehow imply that *interpretations themselves* allow for skepticism about meaning? That there is no way out of interpretive uncertainty? That literary interpretations, merely by being interpretations, are entrenched in skepticism about meaning? Or does it rather mean the opposite: that if meaning skepticism is arrived at through a denial of the contrast between immediate understanding and understanding through an interpretive effort – if meaning skepticism is created when a best case of (understanding) meaning is (mistakenly) construed as an instance of interpretation – does that mean that skepticism *cannot* befall the category of literary interpretation as such, since *within* that category there is no such contrast which could be denied? All literary interpretations are of course *interpretations*. So any lingering doubt about the validity or invalidity of an interpretation, even when left completely unresolved, would not be – even could not be – of a skeptical kind?

What I need to work out in this chapter are answers to the following questions: How does interpretive skepticism, concerning the understanding of literature specifically, relate to the wider meaning or language skepticism exemplified by, for instance, Kripke? In what way is it similar, in what way can it be said to be different? What is literary interpretive skepticism actually skeptical *about*? What does that kind of skepticism look like and how is it created? Is there such a thing as an "interpretive best case" through which the skeptical argument gets off the ground? In what way are the two varieties that Conant distinguished, the Cartesian and the Kantian, relevant to an understanding of interpretive skepticism? Furthermore, how can one see these skeptical varieties at work in traditional problems of interpretive theory?

I would like to start my discussion about what I take interpretive skepticism to be by turning to two works on skepticism in literary (and language) theory, which both give rich and yet, in my view, neither specific nor wide enough definitions of what interpretive skepticism is. These are Talbot J. Taylor's *Mutual Misunderstanding: Scepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation* (1992) and Michel Fischer's *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (1989). I have chosen these two as initial objects of comparison not only because I find them to be two of the most helpful and clear works on the subject, but also because they are two works which I find to be most similar to mine, with respect to both aim and philosophical outlook. Both Taylor and Fischer work in the wake of Wittgenstein and/or Cavell and taking the time to examine them carefully will give two clear advantages:

First, interpretive skepticism is rarely discussed – the theoretical discussions about interpretation rather tend to concern certain antagonistic debates such as disputes about monism vs. pluralism, realism vs. relativism, intentionalism vs. anti-intentionalism, etc. If though I would nevertheless try to sketch something that would bring us closer to a kind of "standard view" on what interpretive skepticism is, these two works would doubtless satisfy this

purpose. Getting clear in our minds such a standard conception – to the extent there is one – will also help to show how my conception differs from it.

Second, comparing my conception with both Taylor's and Fischer's will also bring out what my Cavellian reading can contribute to the discussion that is new – especially in relation to Fischer. One could say that ultimately my dissatisfaction with their respective accounts of skepticism about interpretation lies in the fact they are not Cavellian enough.

3.1. What Is Interpretive Skepticism? – Part I: The "Standard Picture." The Interpretive Realist and the Cartesian Conception of Interpretive Skepticism.

In *Mutual Misunderstanding*, Talbot Taylor sets out to uncover unacknowledged forms of skeptical reasoning in contemporary theories of language. According to Taylor, *communicative skepticism* – that is, skepticism regarding *whether* we understand each other in and through language – plays a central role in the argumentative structure, or, *rhetoric*, as Taylor calls it, of many language theories. This includes language theories that discuss literary interpretation, or that underlie certain literary theories. Taylor argues that these theories do not *seem* to be engaged in, and do not present themselves as asking, the question of *whether* we understand each other in language. Instead, he writes:

> [t]hose professionals who work in language theory – literary theorists, linguists, philosophers of language, communication theorists, semioticians, theorists of rhetoric, discourse analysts, etc. – are more interested in the problem of specifying *what* it is to understand and *how* we understand than in asking *whether* we understand.[238]

According to Taylor, to really ask *whether* we understand each other through language is among such theorists usually considered to be "the sort of non-serious question that only a radical sceptic would even consider raising."[239] However, Taylor demonstrates that the "whether"-question has an important *rhetorical function* in motivating many language theories. It is often with reference to a conceived skeptical *threat* that the theorists can argue the *need* of a theory explaining *how* mutual understanding is possible. While Taylor does not characterize these theories and theorists as skeptical in themselves, he claims that they introduce an initial skeptical moment which serves as an argumentative motor for them. Regarding literary theory and theories of interpretation, Taylor describes this rhetorical strategy in the following way:

[238] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding,* p. 3.
[239] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding,* p. 3.

> Within the theory of literature, for instance, there is a perceived need to defend traditional practices of literary interpretation against communicational scepticism. In this there is a constant refrain: if it is not possible (let alone practicable) to devise a theory by which we may determine whether a given interpretation of a literary text is true or false, then the routine practices of editors, critics, and professors of literature must ultimately be without foundation. And if this is the case, then there can be no grounds for rejecting any interpretation of any text, whether the interpretation is that of a rival critic or (heaven forbid) that of a completely untrained student. In other words, if a student understands Hamlet's graveside soliloquy to be an advertisement for soap powder, then apparently nothing can be said to legitimize the rejection of that interpretation![240]

This is an excellent and succinct picture of how a perceived skeptical threat can enter interpretive theory. One easily sees how it fits, for instance, Hirsch and his anxiety about interpretive validity, as I recounted it in chapter 1.[241] In this quote Taylor touches upon several important features I take to be crucial for any attempt to understand literary interpretive skepticism and which will be addressed in my own investigation:

1) *The perceived perilous situation interpretive practices are taken to be facing if a theory cannot be produced that can effectively ward off the skeptical threat.* If we cannot say theoretically what understanding poetry and literature consists in then how do we know when, and whether, our interpretations really are valid?

2) *The anxiety or distress over interpretive authority*. I take this to be particularly an anxiety about the *professional* authority of the literary critic and scholar. What kind of authority can an interpretive claim have and what is the authority of the professional interpreter compared to a "layman"? This anxiety perhaps becomes most pressing in the two cases Taylor mentions:

2A) *The anxiety over interpretive authority in the case of rival critics or competing interpretations.* The very multitude and variety of interpretive results among professional scholars can create bafflement and theoretical

[240] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 6.

[241] For instance in this passage where he criticizes New Criticism: "A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. […] One proof that the conventions of language can sponsor different meanings from the same sequence of words resides in the fact that interpreters can and do disagree. When these disagreements occur, how are they to be resolved? Under the theory of semantic autonomy they cannot be resolved, since the meaning is not what the author meant, but 'what the poem means to different sensitive readers.' One interpretation is as good as another, so long as it is 'sensitive' or 'plausible.' Yet the teacher of literature who adheres to Eliot's theory is also by profession the preserver of a heritage and the conveyor of knowledge. On what ground does he claim that his 'reading' is more valid than of any pupil? On no very firm ground." Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* p. 4.

unease. If two opposing and mutually exclusive interpretations can be equally well argued for and sustained by the text, how should we judge this conflict? Is one true and the other false? Could both be true? Or should we rather say that both could be valid, or good, or justified (but not true or correct since those categories do not apply to interpretations)? *How* do we know this? And indeed *do* we know this?

2B) *The anxiety over interpretive authority when we are facing, instructing, and initiating students in the practice of academic literary interpretation*. If we cannot back up our professional competence with a theory that accounts for our competence, then what are we to appeal to while responding to invalid interpretations made by "completely untrained student[s]," whose papers we are set to grade? What are we to appeal to beyond that practical competence of interpreting literature? Do we not need a theory that explains why the student who makes a bad interpretation of Hamlet's graveside soliloquy is failing? Would it not be an advantage to be able to point out that the flawed interpretation is defective precisely because it violates the criteria of validity in interpretation? For if we cannot appeal to such a theory – which states the true nature of interpretation and the logic of its validity – how do we know, with certainty, that the interpretation is flawed? How can we legitimately claim to have any more insight on the matter? By what authority do we claim to know? The student thinks his or her Hamlet-interpretation is valid, at least as valid as any other, and we do not. How do we break the stalemate?

3) *The fear that without a theory of interpretation we have no firm ground on which to defend ourselves against absurdities.* In my view, Taylor's example of a student claiming that Hamlet's graveside soliloquy is an advertisement for soap powder is, on the one hand, partly deficient because it seems to be too unlikely and "theoretical" to really cause skeptical anxieties in a teacher of literature. A teacher faced with such a bizarre interpretation would probably be much more inclined to doubt the seriousness of the student than the validity of his or her own interpretive judgment. But on the other hand, there is something about the *nature of the authority* of interpretive claims, which can leave the professional interpreter with a sense of being theoretically defenseless against the *possibility* of bizarre interpretive claims, that Taylor's example gets right. How can we discard as illegitimate those interpretive attempts that are *obviously* not serious, that border on zaniness? If we cannot answer on a general, theoretical, level why absurd interpretations *are* absurd, then what, indeed, would safeguard us against such bizarre interpretations demanding legitimacy?

As I said, Taylor's interest here lies in tracing how skeptical arguments *function rhetorically* in the construal of language theories. He does not claim that

theories employing such rhetorical functions are themselves skeptical, neither is he interested in arguing that skepticism itself should be wrong or somehow philosophically confused in this context.[242] But what he does show, very interestingly and clearly, is that the operative skeptical threat presents itself rather differently depending on what epistemological commitments the interpretive theorists have. *What* the skeptical threat is taken to threaten will vary therewith. There are, however, mainly two antagonistic types of interpretive theorists, *interpretive realists* and *interpretive relativists*. Taylor distinguishes them in this regard:

> [T]he interpretive realist stands by the *truth* of the interpretive community's consensual judgment that text T means (or does not mean) M. The interpretive relativist, on the other hand, takes the consensuality of such judgments to be a matter not of their true correspondence to "the facts" but of their fulfillment (or non-fulfillment) of the community's assertion-conditions for interpretive judgments. […] [T]he introduction of a relativist straw man into interpretive discourse tends to produce the desired rhetorical effect: a perceived "need" […] for a *theory* of interpretation.[243]

I will look at both groups' conceptions of the skeptical threat as they are described by Taylor. Each will prove valuable in bringing out what interpretive skepticism is. It will be predominantly the *realist's* conception, though, that shall help me show what I take to be, if anything, "the standard view" of interpretive skepticism.

The interpretive *realist* thinks there is something like a true or correct meaning of a work, a text, a stanza or whatever interpretive object he or she is concerned with. This makes it likely that one will find the realist interpretive theorist amongst *singularist* theorists of interpretation – that is, theorists who defend the "single right"-view of interpretation. But not necessarily: it is conceivable that someone can be both a realist and a pluralist about interpretation and believe therefore that many interpretations can be true or correct.[244]

The interpretive *relativist*, on the other hand, is someone who denies that there is anything over and beyond what a certain group takes to be the real or true meaning. There is no "true" interpretation to be found beyond the multiple criteria that different communities or groups employ in the establishing of valid interpretations. Thus if it turns out that an interpretive community exists that thinks Hamlet's soliloquy is an advertisement for soap powder,

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[242] Taylor writes: "From the perspective taken in this book, what is interesting about the strategies employed […] is their exemplification of the possibilities afforded within the rhetoric of intellectual metadiscourse for constructing a defense against the threat of scepticsim." Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 161.

[243] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, pp. 159–160.

[244] See for instance Pettersson, "The Literary Work as a Pliable Entity: Combining Realism and Pluralism."

then that would be a valid interpretation for that community and relative to its criteria of validity. If we find such an interpretation absurd then there is nothing we could say that would oppose it outright, merely contend that we do not share the same interpretive standards.

It is precisely because the interpretive relativist *denies* the very thing that the interpretive realist finds necessary for interpretations to be valid at all, namely that there is such a thing as the *true* or *real* meaning (of the work, the phrase, the stanza, etc.), that the realist finds (or at least can find) the relativist to be a closet *skeptic* about interpretation. From the viewpoint of the realist, the relativist position allows for no stable distinction between what is a valid and an invalid interpretation. There is no secure boundary-line separating, on the one hand, what it is to *really* get the meaning of a work of literature and, on the other, to *merely think* or believe one does.[245] This means that, in the eyes of the realist, relativism constitutes a skeptical threat that must be overcome by an interpretive theory. It is therefore presumably the realist's understanding of the skeptical problem that Taylor recounts in the quotation cited earlier: "if it is not possible (let alone practicable) to devise a theory by which we may determine whether a given interpretation of a literary text is *true or false*, then the routine practices of editors, critics, and professors of literature must ultimately be without foundation. And if this is the case, then there can be no grounds for rejecting any interpretation of any text."[246] Without a theory that can sort out the true from the false interpretations, it seems to the realist that interpretive validity in its entirety disappears – and thus anything goes!

And yet the interpretive relativist would not recognize him- or herself as a skeptic about interpretation. In his or her view the relativist position only appears skeptical through the faulty conception of interpretive validity inherent to the interpretive realist's position. The reason why Taylor calls the skeptical threat "a straw man," is precisely because he thinks this threat is only produced, and conceived of, as a *real* threat by the interpretive realist. It is for the interpretive realist that "interpretive relativism has often been presented as issuing a skeptical threat to established practices of literary interpretation, criticism, evaluation, and teaching."[247]

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[245] A good example here of such a relativist would be the neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty, who writes: "For us pragmatists, the notion that there is something a given text is *really* about, something which rigorous application of a method will reveal, is as bad as the Aristotelian idea that there is something which a substance really, intrinsically, *is* as opposed to what it only apparently or accidently or relationally is. The thought that a commentator has discovered what a text is really doing – for example, that it is *really* demystifying an ideological construct, or *really* deconstructing the hierarchical oppositions of western metaphysics, rather than merely being capable of being *used* for these purposes – is, for us pragmatists, just more occultism." Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," pp. 102–103.

[246] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 6.

[247] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 158.

So, if I summarize the realist's conception according to Taylor – which is the closest I think one will reach in producing anything like a "standard picture" of what interpretive skepticism is and what constitutes a skeptical threat to interpretation – one will be presented with the following:

An interpretive skeptic is someone who *doubts* or *denies* that there is a *true* or *correct* interpretation of a word, a sentence, a work, etc. (over and above what some given community thinks is the meaning or presents as the criteria for interpretive validity). According to the standard picture, then, the interpretive relativist is an interpretive skeptic who relativizes interpretive standards until anything and everything is permissible: there is no stable distinction between a valid and invalid interpretation. In order to avoid interpretive skepticism, the interpretive realist will claim we need a *theory* so as to describe *how* we can separate true, correct, *valid* interpretations from false, incorrect, *invalid* misinterpretations and overinterpretations.

Now, if I combine this analysis with the treatment of Cartesian and Kantian skepticism provided in the previous chapter, the standard view of interpretive skepticism takes the following form: the interpretive realist understands the skeptical problematic of interpretation to operate on the Cartesian level of truth and falsity, concerning what is real and unreal, correct and incorrect, valid and invalid. The problematic that this give rise to belongs to the tradition of Schleiermacher's *hermeneutical theory*, touched upon in chapter 1, and can be articulated through the following question: How, in principle, do we separate valid interpretations from misinterpretations (and overinterpretations)? The skeptical threat to which this question gives expression coheres around the postulation of a *gap* between what we *think* a text means and what it *really* means. In order to suture this skeptical gap the realist requires a *theory* that describes, in general, what constitutes a true or correct interpretation – what is it to get it right? Only if we can present a theory that describes *how* valid interpretations are constituted can we adjust our practice (i.e. methods) and be sure that our interpretive practice is valid too.

3.1.1. The Realist Conception of Interpretive Skepticism and the Idea of a "Best Case of Interpretation"

If one accepts, as put forward by Talbot Taylor, the realist conception of what skepticism entails in literary interpretation, i.e. if one accepts what I take to be "the standard picture" of interpretive skepticism – namely a conception that takes the skeptical problem to be at heart a Cartesian variety, centering as it does on bridging a gap between what we *think* counts as valid interpretations and what they really are – then presumably, if one is to follow Cavell, one would also suspect that this skeptical problematic should start with something like "a best case" of interpretation. I would now like to try

and explicate why I think the standard conception is, at best, too limited as a description of the skeptical problematic about literary interpretation. Furthermore, I would like to demonstrate why an attempt to construe something like "a best case of literary interpretation" will fail. I will do this by turning to a scholar who, like myself, has investigated interpretive skepticism in light of Stanley Cavell's work on skepticism, and who also more or less shares, I think, the standard conception of what the skeptical problematic about interpretation comes down to; I am here referring to the work of Michel Fischer.

In contrast to Talbot Taylor, but similar to me, Michael Fischer is not merely interested in investigating skepticism as providing some rhetorical function in the construal of theories of language. In his *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (1989) Fischer wants to critique the skepticism he finds inherent in literary theories of a particular type. Furthermore, his project is an explicit application of Cavell's philosophy on literary theory; in this connection, he argues "that there are significant affinities between deconstruction and the epistemological skepticism that concerns Cavell."[248] Fischer wants to show that influential philosophers and theorists such as Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and Stanley Fish, all bear striking resemblance to Cavell's external-world and other-minds skeptics.

To characterize deconstruction as skeptical, in one way or another, is of course not original – not that Fischer claims originality over this account, citing Eugene Goodheart, Jay Cantor, Charles Altieri, M.H. Abrams, and Christopher Norris, among others, to have reached similar verdicts.[249] Acknowledging how his view resembles others, Fischer writes: "By 'skeptic' Goodheart means a disposition to question the existence of texts, objective reality, authors, stable meaning, and all the other 'good terms' of traditional humanism."[250] Indeed, in *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism*,

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[248] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. xi.

[249] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, pp. 7–8. See also Eugene Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism,* Princeton essays in literature (Princeton and Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1984); Jay Cantor, "On Stanley Cavell," *Raritan*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Summer 1981), pp. 48–67; Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981); M.H. Abrams, "Construing and Deconstructing," in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, eds. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 127–158; Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

[250] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 7. See also Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism,* p. 11. Goodheart furthermore writes: "What characterizes post-structuralism is a questioning, indeed a denial of the independent or substantial existence of the text. Post-structuralist skeptics doubt or deny that the text in or of itself has presence." and "Deconstructive skepticism (the most radical and powerful of literary skepticisms) holds the view that the language of written discourse is inherently unreliable, that no matter how hard a text may try to sustain the illusion of unity, coherence, meaning, truth (attributes of presence and fullness), the text is incorrigibly prone to disunity, incoherence, meaninglessness, and error." Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism*, p. 7, p. 9.

Goodheart writes that "[w]hat is at stake in the skeptical challenge is the status both of our interpretive knowledge of texts and of our values and convictions. Unity, meaning, coherence, [are] all targets of deconstructive suspicion."[251] This view does not only capture what both Fischer and Goodheart mean by a deconstructive skeptic, it moreover fits pretty well with what I have called the realist's "standard view" of interpretive skepticism. This in turn goes to show that deconstruction (or some form of it, at least) is usually considered to be skeptical according to the standard view of interpretive skepticism.

The deconstructionist becomes a skeptic in two different ways Fischer seems to suggest. One way is by denying the ontological stability of the literary work and its meaning. In this way the deconstructionist shows his or her affinity with the external-world skeptic who denies that we can ever know the *real* object. The second way is by denying the relevance of the author's intention to the meaning of literature. Here Fischer links the so-called "death of the author" in criticism to Cavell's conception of other-minds skepticism. In both these cases Fischer seems to understand the skeptical problematic as being essentially of the Cartesian variety. The deconstructionist becomes a skeptic by *denying* some essential features of the literary work, like ontological and semantic stability.[252] Therefore I think it is safe to say that Fischer, to a large degree, adheres to the "standard," realist, picture of interpretive skepticism.

This impression of Fischer is further compounded by the fact that, as might be expected from somebody who thinks he is dealing with a Cartesian variant on the skeptical problematic, Fischer tries to construct something like "a best case" of interpretation. Both a deconstructionist like Derrida and a neo-pragmatist like Stanley Fish, become according to Fischer, skeptics by casting doubt on a presumed best case of literary interpretation. But what, one should ask, would constitute a best case of interpretation? Is there even such a thing? And would one really become a skeptic by rejecting it?

Fischer sets up the skeptical recital from a presumed best case of interpretation in the following way. "First," Fischer says, the skeptical (i.e. post-structuralist, neo-pragmatist, deconstructionist) critics "take up a particular interpretive claim. Generally bordering on a critical commonplace, the claim restates the received view of a well-known text, passage, or author."[253] As examples of such claims Fischer takes: "Milton is the author of *Lycidas*, *Lycidas* is a pastoral, and Jane Austin pokes fun at Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*."[254]

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[251] Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism,* pp. 10–11.
[252] Cf. Fischer chapter 2: "The Text as Object: Literary Theory and External-World Skepticism, and chapter 3: "Reading the Human Figure: Literary Theory and Other-Minds Skepticism" in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*.
[253] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, pp. 16–17.
[254] Fischer*, Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 17.

Secondly, the skeptical critic asks for the *basis* of these interpretive claims: "How do we know that Milton wrote *Lycidas* or that *Lycidas* is a pastoral?"[255] Here Fischer also makes the following remark about how such requests for a basis are related to the interpretive *authority* of the one asking them: "Coming from someone outside (or not yet in) the academic critical community – a freshman, say, or a physicist – this question can reflect genuine curiosity about someone else's work."[256] But if this question is posed by someone "not simply in the academic profession but at its putative summit – at Yale, for instance, or Duke – the question can seem disingenuous, not so much an honest inquiry as a trap that the questioner is setting."[257]

Thirdly, the skeptical critic looks at the evidence produced in favor of the interpretive claim. This kind of evidence, Fischer contends, usually "consists of the text itself (if the critic making the claim is a New Critic), the intention of the author, or some combination of the two (as in Hirsch and Crane)."[258]

Fourthly, "confronted with this evidence" the skeptic "tries to unsettle or 'shake' it, giving it 'one final twist'."[259] The skeptical critic tries to show that the original interpretive claim is not supportable by the evidence provided. He or she can try to unsettle it or twist it by making a radically different, even seemingly absurd reading. Once again Fischer cites Stanley Fish as an example: "Fish takes up what we are tempted to call obviously wrong readings of familiar texts," readings which "seem impossible," such as "an Eskimo reading of 'A Rose for Emily'" and "a gastrointestinal reading of 'The Tyger.'"[260] The point Fish wants to make, according to Fischer, is of course that no reading *is* on principle "impossible" – "whatever shape we happen to assign them [the texts] reflects the temporal and local imperatives of our interpretive community."[261] For Fischer, though, this rejection of a presumed "best case" invariably leads to a permissive relativism in which "anything goes." Such a state of indifferentism constitutes, for him, interpretive skepticism.

Before I start to problematize Fischer's account of interpretive skepticism, beginning with his notion of a "best case," I wish to make clear that that for me Fischer succeeds in tracing out some notable affinities between Cavell's figure of both the external-world and other-minds skeptic on the one hand and certain post-structuralist theorists on the other. Moreover, I think Fischer is correct, and indeed on to something very important, when he says that *the very picture*, or idiom, to which skeptical deconstructionists react – the picture of the text as a kind of stable *object* or structure – is not "a

[255] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 17.
[256] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 17.
[257] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 17.
[258] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 17.
[259] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 17.
[260] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 20.
[261] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 20.

straw man, as has sometimes been supposed" but a real and "important tendency in twentieth-century Anglo-American theory."[262] This is predominantly the idiom of New Criticism, which Fischer also discusses at some length in order that we might better see about what the interpretive skeptics he discusses are actually skeptical.[263] I will return to Fischer on this point in chapter 4. Finally I would not wish to oppose Fischer's claim that some of the critics he thinks are skeptical – for instance Stanley Fish – are rightfully called *skeptics* about interpretation. Having said all of this, what I shall be challenging is the idea that interpretive skeptics becomes skeptics on the basis of their rejection of a purported "best case" of interpretation. This is because I do not think that Fischer's so-called best cases of interpretation actually are best cases of interpretation. I do not think there is such a thing as a "best case" of interpretation, at least not if we want to think of it as being on a par with Cavell's "best case of knowledge." Why is this so?

3.1.2. The Tension within the Idea of a "Best Case of Interpretation"

To answer this I must return to one of the questions I listed at the beginning of this chapter: How does literary interpretive skepticism relate to the more general meaning or language skepticism of Kripke? Kripke's meaning skepticism started on the Cartesian level, organized around a "best case" of meaning: if Kripke could convince us that even a *best* case of meaning – supposedly immediately understandable – actually required interpretation, then not only would he have introduced an infinite regress of uncertainty of meaning (because this interpretation would require a second interpretation, which in turn would require a third, and so on) but in such a case "interpretation," as Stanley Fish claims, "is the only game in town."[264] This means, on the one hand, that I think Fisher is indeed *justified* in calling Stanley Fish a skeptic. However, Fish is in my view, just like Kripke, a general *meaning* skeptic, and literature is nothing but a category of discourse that is taken to share the conditions of meaningfulness pertaining to all linguistic categories. As M.H. Abrams points out in *Doing Things with Texts* (1989), "neither Fish's type of Reader-response viewpoint nor Deconstructive Criticism is a theory specifically of poetry or literature, but a theory of reading and writing in general."[265] But the central question in the present study surrounds *literary* interpretive skepticism – and *within* the category of *literary interpretation* there is no "immediate-understanding" vs. "understanding-through-

[262] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism,* p. 16.
[263] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism,* pp. 10–16.
[264] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* p. 355.
[265] M.H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), p. 29. This book also contains a foreword by Michael Fischer.

interpretation" distinction that *can* be denied and through its denial cause skepticism: *all* literary interpretations are of course *interpretations* and in acknowledging that one denies nothing.

My point is that that literary interpretation *necessarily lacks* the kind of best cases of meaning ("Pass me the salt, please." or "2+2=4" etc.) which a general language skeptic would need in order to generate the skeptical effect on the Cartesian level: If I do not know *this* then what do I know? The skeptic has to convince us that what did not first appear as an interpretation was nevertheless an interpretation after all (*ad infinitum*). That is how doubt can expand globally from just a singular case. This means that to the extent these best cases *are* best cases of unambiguous meaning they are also *necessarily* not (initially understood as) instances of interpretation. If they were, they would not be best cases of unambiguous meaning in the first place, cases the skeptic could use to make his or her shocking revelation. But if all literary interpretations are already acknowledged *as* interpretations, then what becomes of Fischer's idea of a "best case" of interpretation? Fischer writes:

> The deconstructionist wishes to show that doubts infect even "best cases," that is, claims about texts that seem to require little specialized knowledge and ideological persuasion. I say "seem to" because the deconstructionist's point, of course, is that even these apparently obvious or factual claims are at bottom questionable.[266]

Now, in this very quote one can start to see what is problematical with Fischer's idea of a "best case" of literary interpretation by locating the tension that lay within it. Because if, on the one hand, the deconstructionist is supposed to be an *interpretive* skeptic, then the literary claim of the "best case" must of course be "a particular *interpretive* claim."[267] It is by rejecting a *best claim of interpretation* that the radical skepticism of interpretation as such is supposed to get off the ground. However, in order to be a "best case"– analogous here with a best case of knowledge of a generic object – the literary best case must be something seemingly beyond contestation and doubt. Therefore, by the end of the above quote, Fischer describes his best cases of interpretation as "apparently obvious and factual claims." But if the claims are obvious and factual, how can a denial of them lead to *interpretive* skepticism (and not general meaning skepticism)?

In other words, Fischer *needs* the claim to be "obvious," something we all think we *know* about a particular text in order for it to constitute a "best case" which, if denied, would have the generative skeptical effect. But on the other hand, the claim *cannot* be an obvious description or a factual claim since were this so it would *not* count as an *interpretive* claim. This is also what was deficient with his earlier examples of best cases of interpretation,

[266] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 25.
[267] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 16. My italics.

like: "Milton wrote *Lycidas* or that *Lycidas* is a pastoral." Unless some unheard of information on Milton and some radical reconceptualization of what constitutes a pastoral were presented (and accepted), anyone who is familiar with what a pastoral is and with literary history will simply *know* that Milton wrote *Lycidas* and that *Lycidas* is a pastoral. *These are not examples of literary interpretation*. And the point is: if *Lycidas* had been difficult to place with respect to genre or, even, if some new information came to light that cast doubt on whether Milton wrote it – i.e. if there had been room for disagreement and interpretive argumentation in these cases – such claims would lose their status as best cases.[268] Fischer seems, however, to be partly aware of this problem. He writes:

> In using the external-world skeptic's generic object to account for the literary theorist's canonical example, or local instance of indetermination, I do not mean to identify the literary and the philosophical arguments. Compared with a desk, "The Tyger" is obviously complicated and even esoteric. But compared with *Tiriel*, "The Tyger" is more often anthologized and is therefore more familiar to literary critics, and its meaning, though admittedly complex, thought to be understood. Even so, the fact that knowledge of literature may have to depend on such a refined example *limits the impact* of the literary theorist's argument. *Knowledge of literature does not collapse with knowledge of "The Tyger" in the same abrupt and terrifying way that knowledge of the world goes with knowledge of a desk*.[269]

I am unsure I would agree that "The Tyger," even though often anthologized and familiar to critics, is a poem that usually is "thought to be understood." Not without some prior disambiguation regarding what Fischer means with being understood. Does he mean that Blake's poem is understood by all critics *in the same way*? Hardly. After all, Fischer does not say *is* understood but rather *thought to be* understood. In which case *is* it really understood? What is Fischer trying to claim here? I think it is quite clear that if the knowledge of literature does not collapse with the rejection of a so called "best case" (and on this I think Fischer is right), then that shows quite clearly we are not dealing with anything like a "best case" in the sense Cavell talks about them with respect to skepticism.

Still, I would not wish to relinquish the idea that there exists something like a Cartesian variety of interpretive skepticism. However, if this kind of Cartesian skepticism is not initiated by and through a "best case" then how can it even begin? I will return to that question soon but for now let me say that one important reason why Fischer's effort to construe a "best case of

[268] The same goes for Fischer's example that Jane Austin pokes fun at Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. This might constitute a border case where it is not clear-cut whether this should be seen as an obvious fact of the novel or open to interpretation. However, to the extent it is something open to interpretation and interpretive disagreement and argument, it is also no longer a "best case."

[269] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 25. My italics.

interpretation" fails is because his account of interpretive skepticism is not sufficiently *specific*. It does not trace out in any thorough manner what is *peculiar* about the skeptical problematic as it befalls literary interpretation. Fischer does not notice that the distinction between immediate understanding and understanding requiring interpretive effort – the denial of which was crucial for the general meaning or language skepticism of the Cartesian variety – is in fact absent when we turn to literary interpretation. But beyond that, I think Fischer's realist conception of the skeptical problematic as being essentially Cartesian in kind is not *wide* enough either. So let me next turn to why I think the realist's standard picture of interpretive skepticism is too limited to capture the skeptical problematic concerning interpretation.

3.2. What Is Interpretive Skepticism? – Part II: Beyond the Limitations of the Standard Picture. The Kantian Problematic of the Interpretive Relativist

With the aid of Taylor's account, I have recounted how interpretive relativism comes to constitute a skeptical threat to the interpretive realist. It is now time to turn to how the skeptical threat appears to the interpretive relativist. According to Taylor, the interpretive relativist not only challenges the realist's charge of skepticism by retorting that relativism only *looks* skeptical if one accepts the premises of the realist. The relativist goes one step further, surmising it is rather *the realist's* picture that leads to interpretive skepticism. Here is why. The interpretive realist's argument has, according to Taylor, three crucial premises that lead to the defense of its conclusion:

1. To the question WHETHER understanding normally occurs in interpretation, the realist replies: Yes. (The interpretive realist denies communicative skepticism.)
2. The realist presents a specific theoretical account of WHAT that understanding consists in, that is, what it means for an interpretation to be a correct understanding.
3. The realist presents a linguistic theory of HOW such understanding is possible. If what this theory describes would not normally happen in communication, then mutual understanding (1) would not normally occur. (One would have to answer "No" to the WHETHER-question.)

   Conclusion: Therefore the realist's theory of HOW communication is possible has to be true (or understanding would not normally occur).

The relativist, in Taylor's view, counters this by presenting another theoretical account of HOW understanding is possible as his or her first premise:

1. A second theory of language (for instance a structuralist or pragmatic theory), of HOW understanding occurs is taken for granted.
2. If the relativist's theory of HOW understanding occurs is true, then *either* understanding would not usually occur (we would have to answer "No" to the WHETHER-question) *or* the realist account of WHAT communication is, cannot be true.

   Conclusion: Either understanding does not occur (we end up with communicational skepticism) or the realist account of what communication is, is false.[270]

Now, the relativist would not argue that understanding does not normally occur in interpretation – unless he or she is a self-proclaimed communicational skeptic, a position rarely taken up. What the relativist instead states is that "communication could not possibly be WHAT the realist conceives it to be."[271] Choosing (just like Fischer) Derrida and Stanley Fish as examples – but here as examples of interpretive relativists, not skeptics – Taylor writes:

> [N]either Fish nor Derrida ever claims that literary texts are meaningless, that two readers always disagree on textual meaning, or that communicators usually fail to understand each other. On the contrary, Fish insists that such sceptical views *could not be held by anybody*. Rather, he agrees with Derrida that to comprehend why the "uncertainties" of language do *not* present an insurmountable obstacle to the achievement of communicational understanding and the shared interpretation of textual meaning, we need to reconsider the nature of what we call "communication," "understanding," "meaning," and "interpretation."[272]

This means that the skeptical threat, as it appears to the relativist, in a way remains the same as the realist's rendering of it: unless one can present a theory describing HOW interpretation is possible then WHETHER it is possible starts to become dubious. For the relativist though the threat does not, of course, present itself in the form of "relativism," but as the pressure to present *alternative* theoretical descriptions (to the realist one) of what such substantial "things" as "understanding," "meaning," and "interpretation," *are*. The theory must account for the interpretive stability (even if relative) that the relativists do not want to relinquish, and indeed could not relinquish, without becoming skeptics. As a result, the relativist needs to provide some new answers to the questions of WHAT interpretation is, and HOW it is possible. Or as one finds the problematic formulated in Fish and Derrida, quoted by Taylor:

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[270] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 172.
[271] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 166.
[272] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 175.

> If all utterances … are detached from a centering origin and abandoned to an "essential drift," then how is it that any of the world's verbal business gets satisfactorily done? One cannot deny, acknowledges Derrida, "that there are also performatives that succeed, and one has to account for them." (Fish 1989:51, quoting from Derrida 1982: 326)[273]

So the relativist theorist must ask: *What is it* to succeed if it is not, as the realist claims, to get the *true* meaning? What *is* meaning, and, furthermore, what *is* interpretation? What *are* the criteria for validity then and what are their conditions of possibility?

What I think one starts to see here is that *the relativist's skeptical threat*, the threat he or she conceives and reacts to, occurs on the Kantian level. This threat presents itself on the level of criteria and intelligibility, not on the level of truth and falsity as it did for the realist. The relativist's problem is *not*: How do we know that an interpretation is true (or false)? Rather, it is: What does interpretation, meaning, validity, understanding, etc. *need to be* in order for successful interpretations to be *possible at all*? If I cannot say theoretically, what these "things" are, what their "being *so*" are, does not the entire idea of valid interpretation disappear? How can we then account for the purported stability and mutual understanding in our interpretive practices?

This shows, I think, that there is a skeptical problematic that an interpretive theorist encounters which is *wider*, or perhaps deeper, than the one found in the realist account. The skeptical problematic about interpretation is not limited to the question of how we can separate true interpretations from false ones, correct interpretations from misinterpretations or overinterpretations in a realist idiom – the skeptical problematic can in fact concern *whether we really know* what interpretation *is*, what its criteria of validity *are*, what the appropriate logical categories *are* with which to evaluate interpretations, i.e. whether we really know what this word *means* and if we are *authoritative in using it*.

I think that Taylor's account of the skeptical rhetoric in the interpretive relativist's case is helpful in pointing out the limitations of the standard view on what constitutes interpretive skepticism. The "standard" realist view simply does not cover the variety of ways in which interpretive theorists can be troubled by skeptical problems.

One should note though that a similar critique I had earlier launched against Fischer – namely, that his account of interpretive skepticism was not *specific* enough – can be directed towards Taylor too. For Taylor, the skeptical problematic ultimately concerns *theories of language in general*. This means that, just like Fischer, Taylor's discussion of Derrida and Stanley Fish concerns how their language theories have implications for the literary case.

[273] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 175.

And as I said before, I do not deny that they have. But this means that the skeptical problem of literary interpretation is merely an instance of the skeptical problem regarding language in general. Fish indeed needs to explain how there can be such a thing as agreement in interpretation when interpretations never come to an end – neither inside nor outside literature. To accommodate the possibility of reaching something that would even *count* as *the same* understanding, *the same* standards of evaluation, etc., Fish introduces his concept of "interpretive communities." It is the interpretive communities that conjure up the rules, standards, and conceptions of interpretation, meaning, validity, etc. all of which provide interpretive practices their stability as well as ensuring interpersonal intelligibility.[274]

As Taylor draws out in his discussion, one can here trace a substantial similarity between Fish's view, that interpretations never come to an end, and Kripke's claim, that there is no end to the interpretation of a rule. Both Fish and Kripke try to "solve" the difficulty of accounting for communicative and interpretive success by denying the realist's demand for a substantial difference between what it is to *really* follow a rule and what merely seems to do so. Taylor writes:

> Fish claims that […] all that is meant in asserting that communicators understand each other is the "conviction on the part of two or more contextually linked speakers that a particular speech act has taken place" [...] (Fish 1989:51) This point is therefore crucial to the relativist's "solution" to the sceptical implications of his own deconstruction of communicational realism: assertions of communicational understanding are justified if those involved in the communicational acts *believe* they understand each other. Similarly, the assertion that text T means M is justified if those in the interpretive community *believe* that assertion to be justified; that is, if it fulfils the interpretive community's conditions for assertion of textual meaning.
>
> In summarizing the anti-realist position on rule-following, Kripke states that to justify an assertion that A is following rule R "all that is required is that there be roughly specifiable circumstances under which [such assertions] are legitimately assertible" (Kripke 1982: 77–78). Accordingly, the position of interpretive relativism can be given a similar formulation.[275]

[274] "What is the explanation on the one hand of the stability of interpretation (at least among certain groups at certain times) and on the other of the orderly variety of interpretation if it is not the stability and variety of texts? The answer to all of these questions is to be found in a notion that has been implicit in my argument, the notion of *interpretive communities*. […] This, then, is the explanation both for the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) and for the regularity with which a single reader will employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts (he belongs to different communities). It also explains why there are disagreements and why they can be debated in a principled way: not because of a stability in texts, but because of a stability in the makeup of interpretive communities and therefore in the opposing positions they make possible." Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* p. 171.

[275] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 175.

Taylor is here pointing out an important similarity between Fish and Kripke, which further strengthens Michael Fischer's argument that Stanley Fish indeed is a skeptic of sorts. But the impression it strengthens is not that Fish is a skeptic specifically about *literary interpretation* but that he, like Kripke, is a wider kind of *language* skeptic. The interpretation of literature becomes, in a sense, the least of Fish's problems.

However, even if Taylor's analysis of the skeptical threat in the relativist's theorizing has helped widen the understanding of what interpretive skepticism can be, it is still not *wide* enough. In my view neither the interpretive realist nor the interpretive relativist can present, at one and the same time, a satisfactorily wide *and* specific definition of interpretive skepticism. So let me next offer my own analysis of interpretive skepticism and in so doing to outline how I think the Cartesian variant of interpretive skepticism can be created without needing to refute a so called "best case" of interpretation.

3.3. What Is Interpretive Skepticism? – Part III: Cartesian and Kantian Interpretive Skepticism. The Skeptical Twin and the Role of an Interpretive "Hard Case"

What is interpretive skepticism? What does the skeptical threat against literary interpretation look like? According to the realist's Cartesian understanding of the problematic (according to the "standard picture"), the skeptical threat presents itself in the following question: "Do we *really know* which interpretations are valid and which ones are invalid?" For the relativist theorist, on the other hand, the threat is expressed in questions of the following Kantian kind: "Do we *really know* what interpretation *is*? What the criteria of validity *are*? How understanding occurs? What constitutes interpretive success?" In both of these cases, someone who answered "NO" to these two types of questionings would be considered to be a skeptic about interpretation. According to both pictures, the interpretive theorist thinks he or she needs to present a theory that makes it possible to answer in the affirmative instead – to answer "YES." Hereby, I argue, not even the relativist conception of interpretive skepticism is wide enough since, if one is to follow Cavell's understanding of skepticism, it does not encompass what I take to be *both* sides of the skeptical coin. In order to do that I think it is necessary to take to heart what Cavell said about "the epistemologist," the one I have called the skeptic's twin. Let me therefore again quote the following passage from Cavell:

> I do not, that is, confine the term [skepticism] to philosophers who wind up denying that we can ever know; I apply it to any view which takes the existence of the world to be a problem of knowledge. […] [I take] the very raising of the question of knowledge in a certain form, or spirit, to constitute skepticism, regardless of whether a philosophy takes itself to have *answered* the question affirmatively or negatively.[276]

If this is the understanding of the skeptical problematic to be transposed onto the field of literary interpretation, I propose the following as a first stab at a definition of interpretive skepticism:

It is the very question of *how* and *if* we can know the nature of interpretation, *how* and *if* we can know what constitutes the criteria of its validity, raised in a certain spirit and form, that constitutes skepticism about literary interpretation – regardless of whether the theorist in question takes him- or herself to have answered the question affirmatively or negatively.

This means that in contrast to Taylor's and Fischer's conceptions, on my account *both* the interpretive realist and the interpretive relativist, even when they think themselves to have *refuted* what *they* take to be interpretive skepticism, actually become skeptics themselves (in the form of epistemological skeptical twins). This means, were I to spell out this definition a little further, in order to make it more comprehensive:

> Any theoretical approach to literary interpretation that claims (implicitly or explicitly) we *need* a theory that states the true nature and logic of literary interpretation – in particular the criteria of its validity – in order to *really* know *how* to make, and *that* we make, valid interpretations in our interpretive practices, is a *skeptical* approach.
>
> Any theory motivated (whether implicitly or explicitly) by the *skeptical threat* that unless such a theory (which explains WHAT interpretation is and HOW it is possible) is presented, there will linger a risk that we *in practice* systematically fail to meet the criteria of interpretive validity (since we might be mistaken about them), then, once more, such a theory will reveal itself to be skeptical.
>
> Any theory of literary interpretation construed in the above manner is thus skeptical, regardless of whether it holds that we actually *can* state these criteria of validity or not; regardless of whether it is a realist or relativist or constructivist theory; regardless of what it takes the *nature* of the validity in question to be – whether it claims that a valid interpretation needs to be thought in accordance with the author's intention, or with a culture's readerly responses, or with some conception of the text itself, etc.; and regardless of whatever *logical categories* the theory claims the validity of interpretations should be evaluated through – be it true/false, correct/incorrect, justified/unjustified, warranted/unwarranted, plausible/implausible, etc.
>
> Any interpretive theory that follows the above-described pattern is also, through its very approach, *escaping to theory*. Such an escape embodies an *avoidance* of the difficulties and uncertainties that *concrete* literary interpre-

[276] Stanley Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, p. 46.

> tive work may generate. Such concrete interpretive problems can be either local and practical in nature, or opening up more general and theoretical concerns. The skeptical escape to theory is created when theory tries to solve (but forecloses thereby) these concerns and problems evoked by interpretation, *beforehand*. Accordingly, an escape to theory constitutes both a failure to adequately shoulder one's interpretive *authority*, as well as an illegitimate attempt to *transgress* that authority.

As one can see, my analysis of interpretive skepticism focuses directly on the Kantian level of the skeptical problematic – on the level of criteria, intelligibility, and "being *so*." However, that is where the interpretive realist ends up as well, I argue, even if he or she *starts* his or her theorizing on a Cartesian level. Let me therefore now return to how I think there can be something like Cartesian skepticism about interpretation which does not start with a best case. That there is a Cartesian variant of skepticism not beginning with a "best case" is something I take to be part of the *peculiarity* of interpretive skepticism. What I will argue instead is that the Cartesian variant of interpretive skepticism rather, if anything, starts off with something like a "hard case." The Cartesian problematic can get hold of us, typically, when we find ourselves stuck in, and baffled by, a real interpretive *problem*. Such as when we face two opposing and exclusionary interpretations of the same text, or disagree whether or not a certain reading is an overinterpretation, or when we hit upon a particularly difficult text to interpret that leaves us uncertain about how we should approach it, etc.

To illustrate how this can happen, let me present the following quote from William Irwin, which exemplifies the latter problem, namely a concrete instance of interpretive difficulty. The "hard case" in question concerns how one should interpret William Blake's "London," a problem that fires off a skeptical reasoning of the Cartesian variety. Even if Irwin does not see this – and is not thinking about the problems he discusses in terms of skepticism at all – I shall argue that the case constitutes a Cartesian problematic which then, inevitably, leads to a Kantian problematic about the possibility of interpretive understanding and the criteria of validity. In *Intentionalist Interpretation* (1999), Irwin writes:

> A normative approach to Blake's "London" asks: How are we to understand the meaning of the poem? What method shall we employ? One normative method would be to seek the poet's intention in composing his work, taking that intention to be the key to the poem's meaning. Is the poet, for example, calling for social reform, the abolition of the "mind-forg'd manacles," or just despairing in *Experience*? What we do not ask is how such understanding occurs or is even possible. (This is the concern of a descriptive approach.) We seek the meaning through an established method, but we do not explore the ontology of the phenomenon of understanding. How interpretive understanding occurs, and what its ontological basis is, are the concerns of a descriptive approach. How is it that "London" can speak to me? How do the "mind-

> forg'd manacles" have meaning for me? How can this line from the past speak into my present? What is the nature of this interpretive understanding?[277]

Now, as one can see in this quote, Irwin does not think of himself as dealing with a skeptical problematic about interpretation at all. Rather, he is defining his understanding of the distinction between normative theories of interpretation (which investigate and suggest how we *should* interpret) and descriptive theories (which investigate how we *do* interpret). While I remain unconvinced by the way Irwin tries to separate these two kinds of questions and concerns, this will not be of central importance in this context.[278] The point is rather to notice how there are two other important distinctions at work in the above quote which Irwin does not address but which are relevant to his problems. These are the distinctions between, on the one hand: practical and theoretical questions with regard to literary interpretation, and on the other: Cartesian and Kantian questions in theorizing about interpretation. Let me try to spell out how I take these two sets of distinctions to hang together in the above quote.

It is striking how *quickly* Irwin leaves (or Irwin's normative critic leaves) the first, as I read it, *practical* interpretive question about how to read Blake's "London," and *leaps* first into a question about *method* and then to a theoretical conception about what constitutes meaning in poems: "How are we to understand the meaning of the poem? What method shall we employ? One normative method would be to seek the poet's intention in composing his work, taking that intention to be the key to the poem's meaning." It only takes three sentences, one for each step. The practical (how do we read the poem?), the methodological (what method should we apply?), the theoretical (what is the key to a poem's meaning?). This serves as a good illustration of how (what I shall call) an interpretive "hard case" functions as the starting point for the Cartesian problematic of interpretation. The hard case pushes us to ask how we should read poems *in general* (the question of an adequate method) in order to get it right. This question in turn calls for an understanding of what constitutes interpretive success and literary meaning in general – questions that are waged on the Kantian level; reading for the authorial intention will for instance appear as the appropriate "method" *if* "intention [is considered] to be the key to the poem's meaning."

This means I disagree also with Irwin's claim that when asking methodological questions we do not approach or are not pushed towards, questions

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[277] William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, Westport, 1999), p. 3.

[278] My critique of his way of trying to separating these two concerns would be the following: how could we *not* think that we *should* interpret according to a certain "method" (a normative question, according to Irwin), if this method happened to be the one actually *capturing* what meaning *is* and in accordance with "the nature of […] interpretive understanding" (which is a descriptive question, according to Irwin)?

like: "how such understanding […] is even possible?" or "how interpretive understanding occurs, and what its ontological basis is?" and "How is it that 'London' can speak to me? How do the 'mind-forg'd manacles' have meaning for me?" These are all questions of a distinctly Kantian type. Because if one adopts the "method" of an intentionalist reading of, say, Blake's poetry, trying to establish "the poet's intention in composing his work, taking that intention to be the key to the poem's meaning," then that very choice of method is clearly *grounded* in a theoretical account of what constitutes literary meaning and interpretive success in general! Such a theory *is* an account of how understanding is possible, what its basis is, and how the poem can speak to me at all. According to the intentionalist theorist, the poem can supposedly speak to me, precisely because my "method" of interpretation aims at the right "thing": the authorial intention that constitutes the meaning of the work.

The Cartesian variant of interpretive skepticism thus usually begins with a concrete singular and difficult case of interpretation. The *practical* way to deal with such a problem would be to stay on the level of interpretation, simply put, it requires perseverance, "to keep on trying": re-read the poem and perhaps stress and compare different parts of the poem in different ways. One can read other interpretations of the poem or compare this poem with other poems of the same author, or from the same period and genre. Perhaps the author has provided a commentary about the poem that can be of interpretive assistance? In certain cases of interpretation it will be important to straighten out the intentions of the author, but equally in other cases intention will be irrelevant. Sometimes certain readerly responses will prove highly informative, on other occasions not. And so on. In the *practical* spirit of dealing which such difficulties we persist in staying on the rough ground of interpretation and interpretive argumentation. *We look at and see* the specific cases we have to hand and identify what precise treatment they require. Some cases *do* invite theoretical reflection, for instance on concepts like "intention" or on what role authorial intent can play. But in such cases, the theoretical work is part of the real interpretive practice, and does not constitute an escape to theory. Such theorizing does not abandon the rough ground of interpretation.

There are *many* things we can do to try and settle the question of how to read a poem *practically* without abandoning the level of concrete interpretive work to be necessarily undertaken, and the burden and anxiety that this arduous work brings with it, such as the burden of knowing that we may not succeed anyway, that we might remain unsatisfied with our reading or the readings of others, that, indeed, we might not think that *any* reading really does justice to the poem.

None of this, though, is mentioned by Irwin. This might be because it is so *easy* to draw another moral from an interpretive "hard case," namely that its particular difficulties have revealed something of a more general nature.

An inability to make out how I should read Blake's poem, could worry me or puzzle me. Below, I sketch what I take to be a typical skeptical route of thought that begins with an interpretive "hard case" which initiates a Cartesian problematic and culminates in a skeptical Cartesian conclusion, which then simultaneously pushes the interpreter into the Kantian problematic about interpretation:

1. The interpreter hits upon a particular hard case of interpretation, which makes him or her unsure about what would constitute a valid interpretation in *this* particular case. (The "hard case" can be a scenario in which I am torn between two equally well-argued but incompatible interpretations, or a conflict with another interpreter whether a reading is a valid interpretation or an overinterpretation, or simply a text that seems to resist interpretive efforts, etc.).
2. In order to solve this particular hard case, the interpreter asks him- or herself how he or she usually proceeds in interpretive cases that are successful. This gives rise to the questions: What do I *in general* do in order to make valid interpretations? How do I *in general know* what makes an interpretation valid? How do I in general separate valid from invalid interpretations? The interpreter can then consult previous instances of what he or she considered to be successful cases.
3. However, as the interpreter consults previous successful interpretations, he or she realizes that there was indeed *room* for disagreement, and conflict *there too*. In fact: regarding interpretive claims there is *always* room for the *possibility* of disagreement and conflict. Even if *I* did not doubt the validity of my previous successful readings, other interpreters, supposedly as competent in understanding literature as me, *may* have. So *how do I know* that these previous cases *really were* successful and that those interpretations *are* valid? If others thought of them as invalid/over-/mis- interpretations (or at the very least there had been the possibility to do so) then how can I be sure? (Cartesian problematic) What can I appeal to? Can I describe a *method* that I follow, designed to ensure interpretive validity? (The interpreter feels the pressure to give a *theoretical* justification of his or her competence in the form of a theory that describes interpretive understanding, the criteria of validity, which the interpretive procedure or "method" is designed to capture.)
4. No, I cannot describe such a general method or theory.
5. Then *how do I know* that I *do* make valid interpretations in general? If I cannot *say* (theoretically) what it means to do so, can I really claim to *know* that my interpretations in general are valid? Can I then claim to know, in general, the difference between valid and invalid interpretations?
6. Conclusion: I guess I cannot. (Cartesian skeptical conclusion.)

7. (In order to avoid the Cartesian skeptical conclusion of being unable to separate valid interpretations from invalid ones, the interpreter enters a Kantian problematic:) I suppose I will have to ask some fundamental theoretical questions about the nature and logic of interpretation: what are *the criteria for* interpretive validity and what makes valid interpretations possible? Otherwise it will seem not only dubious whether I ever make valid interpretations that live up to the (right) criteria of validity, but furthermore I seem to lack authority and knowledge to say what "literary interpretation" *is*. The entire concept of literary interpretation seems to evaporate before me: when pressed I seem unable to describe its "being *so*." I can no longer trust that *I know what I mean* by it. (The threat of a skeptical Kantian boggle.)

Now, one can see that this way of arguing is *not* the same as Cavell's Cartesian skeptic, who starts with a best case of knowledge, follows it to a Cartesian skeptical conclusion that we can never know, and ultimately (if followed through) to a Kantian boggle in which the object about which we are trying to obtain solid knowledge becomes fuzzy (its "being *so*" becomes unclear). What one sees here is something similar and yet not identical. One difference is that the epistemological philosopher who begins with a best case and a generic object is not really trying to say anything *about* that object itself (about the hands in Moore's case, for instance). The skeptic *or* the epistemologist, demonstrating a "best case," is not trying to make us see something *particular* about that object. In the skeptical recital of the external-world skeptic the object is supposed to be taken as a *generic* object that carries the fate of all existence of external things.

In contrast to that situation, the interpretive skeptic, or his or her twin, is here *really* trying to say something about the literary work, at least initially. The interpreter starts with a *real,* singular, problem. The problematic moves from this concrete, *practical*, singular, hard case, into the *theoretical*, general, question about the nature and possibility of interpretation. That is, the Cartesian problem turns into one (or several) Kantian question(s) about the criteria of valid interpretation. But these Kantian questions about criteria are in turn *treated as if* they were questions operating on the Cartesian level, concerning truth and falsity. The interpretive epistemologist *thinks* he or she needs to present a theory (hopefully the *true* theory) about the *real* nature of interpretation. The interpretive epistemologist or skeptical twin wants, like Kripke, some sort of theoretical *meta-fact* about the nature of interpretation, which guides and guards interpretive praxis. And that "fact" must be sought out *first* in order for the interpretive epistemologist to feel adequately equipped for the practical, interpretive, task.

This means that any direct reckoning with Blake's poem will have to wait. The interpretive epistemologist and skeptic will say that we must first ask: "How is it that 'London' can speak to me? How do the 'mind-forg'd

manacles' have meaning for me? How can this line from the past speak into my present? What is the nature of this interpretive understanding?"

3.3.1. Interpretive Skepticism in Traditional Problems of Interpretive Theory

Let me now turn to how this form of skeptical theorizing about interpretation can be found in traditional problems of interpretive theory. It is important to stress that my account of interpretive skepticism does not imply that *all* theorizing about interpretation is skeptical. As I noted in the previous chapter, the posing of transcendental questions need not lead one into a *skeptical* reasoning of the Kantian variety. To ask how something is possible – such as to inquire into the conditions accounting for the possibility of our overall linguistic capacity to comprehend meaning or more specifically our capacity to make valid literary interpretations – does not by itself make anyone a skeptic. Neither do I think that theoretical generalizations, or even stipulated definitions, about interpretation cannot occasionally be fruitful and useful – they certainly can, not least for pedagogical purposes. Nor do I deny that such theoretical work can be of use for our interpretive practices in various ways either – evidently they can. Whether or not an instance of theorizing becomes skeptical has to do with the particular "spirit and form" it is conducted in: it has to do with the purpose that such theorizing is supposed to serve.[279]

It is when one asks such questions about the possibility, the criteria, the "being *so*," of valid interpretation in order to theoretically justify, legitimatize, and regulate interpretive practice that one approaches skeptical reasoning. It is when questions are posed about *how* valid interpretations are possi-

[279] Here I think one should recall what Wittgenstein writes in *Philosophical Investigations*, § 132: "We want to establish an order in our knowledge of the use of language; an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not *the* order. To this end we shall constantly be giving prominence to distinctions which ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook. This may make it look as if we saw it as our task to reform language. Such a reform for particular practical purposes, an improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, is perfectly possible. But these are not the cases we have to do with. The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing its work." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 132, pp. 43e–44e. It is perfectly possible, and sometimes advisable and helpful, to make reformations of language and "improvement[s] in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstanding in practice." There are numerous such examples in literary theory and interpretive practice. One can, for specific purposes, certainly define what one means with "interpretation," when one wants to distinguish it from something else, say from structural analysis or narratological analysis. This is not a problem, philosophically or practically, since here language *is doing its work*. The point is not that we cannot make technical definitions. Philosophical confusion arises when we try to project our technical concept back onto other situations and contexts, beyond the ones for which the stipulation was made, and claim that *this* is *really* the true meaning of "interpretation," and that those who do not underwrite our stipulation are *mis*using or misunderstanding the concept of interpretation.

ble in order to secure that they really *are* possible – or to speak with Taylor: it is when the questions of HOW are raised in order to answer the WHETHER question affirmatively – that we enter into a Kantian, *skeptical* problematic. And it can sometimes be hard to make out whether an interpretive theory is presented in order to lend us a theoretical foundation for the practice of interpretation, or whether it is merely a grammatical investigation, tracing the logical relations of a concept. Such investigations may be helpful for interpretive practice, but they should not police that practice.

On that note I would like to pause and briefly point out how my critique of interpretive skepticism in interpretive theory, despite certain striking similarities, hereby differs from the more disparaging view of interpretive theory one finds in Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' seminal text "Against Theory" (1982). In "Against Theory" Knapp and Michaels write:

> By "theory" we mean a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general. […] Contemporary theory has taken two forms. Some theorists have sought to ground the reading of literary texts in methods designed to guarantee the objectivity and validity of interpretations. Others, impressed by the inability of such procedures to produce agreement among interpreters, have translated that failure into an alternative mode of theory that denies the possibility of correct interpretations. Our aim here is not to choose between these two alternatives but rather to show that both rest on a single mistake, a mistake that is central to the notion of theory per se. The object of our critique is not a particular way of doing theory but the idea of doing theory at all.[280]

Though Knapp and Michaels are not discussing interpretive theory in relation to skepticism, their critique of theory and my critique of skeptical theory are very similar in certain respects. Both approaches oppose the idea that a theoretical account of interpretation is needed to *govern,* or *ground*, interpretive practice, as well as criticizing *both* realist and relativist theories of interpretation on this point.[281] Knapp and Michaels go on to say that they will not try to *solve* these traditional problems in literary theory, since they believe these problems do not constitute "real" problems at all. In this misapprehension they find intentionalists and anti-intentionalists to be equally mistaken.[282] Last but not least, my description of skeptical "escapes to theory" partly echoes their critique of theory as "the attempt to escape practice."[283]

However, in terms of *how* we analyze the problems of interpretive theory and in what way we think that certain theoretical problems are "unreal," we

[280] Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," p.11.
[281] I take it to be quite obvious that Knapp's and Michaels' characteristics of these two forms of contemporary theory fit with Taylor's description of the interpretive realist and the interpretive relativist, respectively.
[282] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," pp. 11–12.
[283] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," p. 30.

part company. According to Knapp and Michaels, "theory itself only seems possible or relevant – when theorists fail to recognize the fundamental inseparability of the elements involved."[284] The only concrete example they provide of how inseparable elements have been mistakenly separated (thus constituting imaginary problems), regards the relation between authorial intention and literary meaning. Having accused "theory" for trying to govern practice, Knapp and Michaels in turn want to end the interpretive debate about intention by claiming that "meaning" simply *is identical with* authorial intention.[285] In arguing for this, they themselves of course appeal to a specific theoretical account of meaning.

Not only do I find their definition of meaning here to be lacking, but, what is more, I cannot see how the consequences they draw from positing an identity between authorial intention and meaning be any less limiting for interpretive practice than the interpretive theories they criticize. In their case, a first-order implication would be that any interpretation explicitly disregarding authorial intention would be ruled out as impossible. In my view this is precisely what constitutes an *escape to theory*; one tries to block, in advance, a whole swathe of possible readings that do not fit pre-given theoretical requirements.

However, I take the relation between interpretive theory and practice to be much more complicated and multifarious. "Theory" cannot simply be ruled out as illegitimate; one must look in each and every case what sort of work theory is supposed to do. In fact, I would venture the suggestion that a great deal of the questions raised in theories of interpretation appear like the face of Janus: they have the dual nature of being understood as either theoretically unproblematic *or* skeptical. Or perhaps I should rather say: the very same *set of words* can be used to pose different types of theoretical questions. To substantiate what I mean, let me cite a list of questions from Paul Thom's *Making Sense* (2000) that Thom thinks a good theory of interpretation should be able to answer:

> I suppose, a good theory of interpretation would provide a coherent set of answers to the following ten questions:
>
> 1. What is an interpretation?

[284] Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," p. 12.

[285] "Some theorists have claimed that valid interpretations can only be obtained through an appeal to authorial intentions. This assumption is shared by theorists who, denying the possibility of recovering authorial intentions, also deny the possibility of valid interpretations. But once it is seen that the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning, the project of *grounding* meaning in intention becomes incoherent." Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," p. 12.

2. What is the structure of interpretation? (What gets interpreted? What for?)

3. What is it to interpret?

4. What is the range of interpretation? (Are critical interpretation, legal interpretation, psychoanalytic interpretation, performative interpretation, and interpretation of a social practice, all interpretation in the same sense? What kinds of interpretation does the theory cover?)

5. What is the relation between interpretation and understanding?

6. What is the relation between interpretation and explanation? (Is explanation interpretation? Is interpretation explanation?)

7. How are interpretations evaluated? (What, if anything, are the limits of what counts as a successful interpretation?)

8. Is there a method of interpretation?

9. In what sense is interpretation inherently plural? (Does the plurality in interpretations imply that one interpretation cannot be rationally preferred to another?)

10. What makes this theory of interpretation preferable to others?[286]

In my view all of the questions from 1 – 9 could *either* be taken non-skeptically *or* skeptically. (Question number 10 is another matter so I shall put it to one side). So for instance, in a situation where a teacher is instructing students how to make good interpretations, the teacher may ask any of the questions 1 – 9, with the main purpose of enhancing the student's *practical* interpretive ability by means of some meta-reflection. Answers can then also be given through concrete examples, or in accordance with general rules of thumb.

Take question 1, for example: "What is an interpretation?" Say that the teacher wants the students not simply to recount what "happened" in a novel, but actually to *interpret the work*. The teacher might then give (and usually does indeed give) various examples of good interpretations, and perhaps also

[286] Paul Thom, *Making Sense: A Theory of Interpretation* (New York, Oxford: Lanham, Boulder, 2000), pp. 1–2.

of bad ones – in order to show the students the difference between proper and improper interpretations. The teacher will accordingly show that "*this* is an interpretation – *that* is merely a summary of the plot," "*this* is a valid, well-argued interpretation, *that* is a speculative overinterpretation," and so on.

Question 8: "Is there a method of interpretation?" This question could in turn be paraphrased as meaning: What sorts of strategies are appropriate for different kinds of interpretations? Well, we can for instance do *this* – this is a good thematic interpretation. You can therefore focus on *these* sorts of questions. Or we can do *this*, which is a structural interpretation, therefore these types of questions would be more suitable, etc.

Or take question 9: "In what sense is interpretation inherently plural?" In teaching students how to write literary interpretations we usually also teach them how to enter into dialogue with other interpreters of the same work, genre or author. Thus it becomes relevant to understand how and whether another interpretation is something I must argue *against*, or if it is not in conflict with mine, if it supports my own, or perhaps makes my own interpretation superfluous, etc. As a student, I am to learn how to treat and address other interpretations in relation to my own.[287]

In the above cases I would say that the teacher is *using* and *relying* on the criteria of literary interpretation as it pertains to literary studies. He or she attempts to teach the student what valid interpretations *are* by, first of all, demonstrating and exemplifying them and by instructing the student to *write* interpretations, for which assessment and feedback is provided. As the teacher and students engage in their practical interpretive work of reading and writing interpretations, they simultaneously learn what "literary interpretation" means and is: the criteria of that concept as well as its criteria of validity. In such pedagogical settings or scenes of instruction teacher and student alike are capable of both being instructed and of instructing.[288]

But when these questions are posed as a way of constructing a foundationalist theory of interpretation, the theorist or critic is not evoking, using, or relying on the criteria of interpretation, as the teacher had done, rather he or she *denies* them. He or she is *denying* that, one, we *can* rely on such criteria; that, two, they are successfully operative in our interpretive praxis, and three that we have the requisite authority to know them. He or she is deny-

[287] There is a similar duality at play in how we might understand Annette Barnes when she asks in her *On Interpretation:* "What is the status of, and what is the standard of acceptability for, the linguistic expression of critical interpretations of artworks? […] Are they true or false, or only plausible, defensible, interesting or the like?" Annette Barnes, *On Interpretation: A Critical Analysis* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 42.

[288] As he describes philosophy as "the education of grownups," Cavell writes: "The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups this is not natural growth, but *change*. Conversion is a turning of our natural reactions; so it is symbolized as rebirth." Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 125.

ing, therefore, that the masters of that practice can do their work without theoretical regulation and improvement.

The reason why I have chosen to call skeptical theorizing about interpretation an "escape to theory" is that I believe this mode of theorization is often motivated by a wish to *avoid* that messy, painful and bewildering predicament in which we tend to find ourselves when we enter into interpretive conflicts. It is not that such conflicts *are* necessarily exacerbated when we choose to take a step back in order to view the problem with some (theoretical) distance. While sometimes we should simply take a closer look at the work (and to the extent that one, or both, of us may have avoided or failed doing so, a conflict ensues), on other occasions it is precisely a theoretical scrutiny of our respective approach to the work that is needed. Sometimes it is most prudent to alternate between these two procedures.

The *escape to theory* occurs, however, when one imagines that a general theory of interpretation could solve these sorts of conflicts *in principle* and, as it were, *in advance:* before they happen one tries to make sure they *cannot* happen. Such attempts are traditionally made in interpretive theory through *definitions* of key concepts like "literary meaning," since "the meaning" is what after all valid interpretations are supposed to capture. This has been done, as Jorge J.E. Garcia and William Ray point out, in various ways:

> Meaning interpretations come in various forms, depending on what one takes the meaning of a text to be. The meaning of the text can be taken in at least four different ways, which in turn generate four different kinds of meaning interpretations: the meaning as understood by the author of the text; the meaning as understood by particular audiences; the meaning as understood independently of what authors or particular audiences understand; and the meaning as including both the meaning, taken in one or more of the three ways mentioned, and its possible implications.[289]

> [T]he dominant theoretical and critical developments of the last thirty or forty years share a common ground, which is to be found in a pervasive notion of literary meaning underlying theoretical and critical programs […]. [T]he major theoreticians have all been grappling with the same problem: namely that "meaning," as it pertains to literature, always seems to have at least two meanings, each of which entails a different, and frequently contrary, theory of the literary work, as well as a distinct critical practice.[290]

The decisive thing here is precisely how the theoretical definition of literary meaning has been taken to "entail" "distinct critical practice[s]"; depending on the theoretical understanding of meaning at work there will be fundamen-

[289] Jorge J. E. Gracia, "Relativism and the Interpretation of Texts," *The Philosophy of Interpretation* (1999) eds. Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore, A Metaphilosophy Monograph, series ed. Armen T. Marsoobian (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 47.
[290] William Ray, *Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 1–2.

tal "implications" for what kind of interpretive debates we can have about literature. So for instance, as Garcia goes on to point out, when "interpretation is supposed to be the understanding of what an author understood by a text […] it is obvious that what the author understood functions as the criterion which establishes when interpretation is correct or not."[291] Here I think one sees more clearly how such traditional conflicts within interpretive theory, like those I listed in chapter 1 – such as singularism vs. multiplism, intentionalism vs. anti-intentionalism, etc. – often are involved in a Kantian skeptical problematic of trying to *define* the criteria of "literary meaning," and thereby of interpretive validity.

This is explicit in for instance P.D. Juhl's intentionalist theory: "[T]here is a logical connection between the meaning of a literary work and the author's intention or, to put it differently, that to understand a literary work *is*, in virtue of our concept of the meaning of a literary work, to understand what the author intended to convey or express."[292] In his *Intention* (1980), Juhl asks "why is a conceptual analysis of literary interpretation useful?" His reply is twofold:

> By providing an account of the logical structure of statements and arguments about the meaning of a literary work, such a theory makes us aware of what we as critics or readers are doing in interpreting literature. It makes us aware, in other words, of the logical commitments of our claims about the meaning of literary works.
>
> Furthermore, a theory of this sort provides the basis for a principled acceptance or rejection of an interpretation of a literary work. Without such a theory we can accept or reject the practical criteria to which a critic might appeal in support of his interpretation of a work only on intuitive grounds. The theory enables us to justify the acceptance or rejection of such criteria and hence (indirectly) of the interpretations based on them.[293]

According to Juhl, the criteria we rely on in interpretive practice are too uncertain, they are merely, as he says, "intuitive." The purpose of his theory is thus to provide us with a "basis for a principled acceptance or rejection of an interpretation of a literary work," which supposedly should *in principle* already settle certain interpretive debates. As a consequence, if I defend an *anti*-intentionalist theory of literary meaning, I will not have to struggle with those specific, messy, perhaps highly morally charged cases, where other critics claim that we cannot or should not ignore authorial intention. I can *on principle* rule out such readings, and the claims they make upon me, because based on my theoretical account of literary meaning, the criteria of validity have nothing to do with authorial intention. I can therefore, safely, *avoid* them.

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[291] Gracia, "Relativism and the Interpretation of Texts," p. 51.
[292] Juhl, *Interpretation*, p. 47.
[293] Juhl, *Interpretation*, pp. 10–11.

3.3.2. Interpretive Avoidance and the "Escape to Theory"

This in turn pushes me to another important issue I enumerated at the beginning of this chapter: the anxiety and distress about interpretive *authority*. The escape to theory is, I argue, an attempt also to transgress the authority I have in making an interpretive claim. This is paradoxically an attempt at transgression that simultaneously becomes an avoidance of my genuine responsibility for that very same interpretive claim. Because in making an interpretive claim, I do not only claim to see something in a text. I claim that you should be able to see it too. I invite, I hope, I do the best I can in order to *make* you see what I see. The interpretive claim is a claim to community, it is a claim to communal intelligibility. And my interpretation reveals something, not only about the text alone, it discloses things about me as a reader also. It reveals, in ways beyond my control, what I see, and what I do not see, my interests and my focus as well as my blind-spots. And, in an analogous way, your response to my interpretation, your acceptance or rejection of it, reveals not only something about the text, or about my interpretation, but also something about you.

What can make interpretive debates so painful is of course that literary works and what they say are important to us. So if my claim to community is rejected or my interpretive invitation is declined, and therefore you do not see what I see in a specific text, this might mean a great variety of things. There might be no community, no "us" for me to appeal to. Interpretive conflicts can, in cases that matter to us, leave us with a roaring sense of alienation and isolation. As if we do not share worlds. And we might not even be sure whether it is *literary* worlds, or more broadly, life-worlds, that we do not share. Feminist and Marxist criticism usually bring out these kinds of glitches and oversights in vision and interpretive perspective. Through such perspectives we may ask: "what does it mean that you cannot see the misogyny in this particular play by Strindberg, when I think that I have shown, as clearly as one could possibly ask for, that it is *there*?" Or: "what does it mean that I cannot see the white middle-class male gaze in this novel by Coetzee *the way* you do? That I do not see it as something at work, or something the narrative indulges in, but as something distinctly contested and criticized precisely through the narrator's apparent unawareness of it – which rather highlights it?" What, then, more generally, do any such interpretive conflicts reveal about us, about misogyny, about whiteness, about sex, about class, about Strindberg, about Coetzee – and their works?

These are all questions legitimately calling for theorization, for clarification, for investigation. But one way of *avoiding* them, and of avoiding the painfulness of the real interpretive conflicts they underscore, is by making an authoritarian *escape to theory*. I can lay the authority of my reading primarily on some underlying theory of language, or meaning, or interpretation. This means that if you do not underwrite that theory and accept its implica-

tions – I will rule you out. I will *on principle* reject your claim to interpretive community. Until you do accept it, I will not listen to you, and nothing you say, none of your interpretive claims, will be worth my attention. Simply put: I *avoid* you. I avoid you by denying you the same interpretive authority as myself. By drawing my interpretive authority from my underlying theory, I can, so to speak, hit you over the head with it. It does not matter if that theory is intentionalist or anti-intentionalist, anti-Marxist or Marxist, feminist or anti-feminist, relativist or realist. If that is what I do with it, I have made sure that we are not interpretive equals. My authority has therefore become authoritarian.[294]

3.3.3. Interpretive Authority and "Literary Competence." The Relation Between Grammatical/Wittgensteinian Criteria and Expertise/Austinian Criteria in Academic Interpretation

So what *kind of authority* are we then appealing to when we are making interpretive claims about what a literary text (or a passage in that text) means or can be seen to mean? How do we avoid becoming authoritarian?

This question brings me back to the categories I discussed in chapter 2 when I looked at Cavell's distinction between Austinian criteria and Wittgensteinian (grammatical) criteria. Cavell distinguished between Austinian criteria (criteria certain specialized groups have, say ornithologists about definitions of different sorts of birds), and Wittgensteinian criteria (criteria of meaning of words you have in having a mother tongue, say, what a bird is in a non-specialized, ordinary sense – you have the concept of "bird"). According to Cavell, skepticism is not generated through mistakes or doubts about Austinian criteria. We will not feel that our entire authority to say and to know what something is disappears if we fail to adequately master a technical concept. My failure to adequately distinguish a goldfinch from other birds will not drive me into the arms of the skeptic. However, if someone could incur doubt whether I were authoritative in even saying what a *bird* is – in a best case, in perfect conditions, with one sitting there in front of me – then the matter is different. It is only when we somehow are led to believe that our Wittgensteinian, or grammatical, authority has been jeopardized through a particular best case that the threat of skepticism enters.

This forces me to ask: are the criteria of interpretation in focus here of an Austinian or Wittgensteinian variety? Is the concept of interpretation at work in academic criticism only a *technical* concept used by experts, or a concept

[294] I will return to this problematic of what constitutes an "escape to theory" in relation to literary interpretations that turn on moral, existential and political problems more fully in chapter 7. I will draw out particular features in relation to the hermeneutics of suspicion, Sedgwick's discussion of reparative and paranoid readings, Cora Diamond's discussion of the so-called difficulty of philosophy vs. the difficulty of reality. Some passages from Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* will also figure in this chapter.

that all interpreters of literature are in some sense authoritative in using? Because if the relevant criteria would be of an Austiniain kind this would imply that any sensed uncertainty about interpretation (what interpretation is, what its validity is, etc.) would not constitute anything like a *skeptical* problematic at all – merely a lack of some piece of specialized knowledge which could be redeemed if we just took the trouble to study harder.

In my view there are significant affinities between the authority with which the ordinary language philosopher appeals to "what we say when," and the authority with which the academic interpreter appeals to what we can meaningfully see in a literary text. But there are also, I argue, important differences. My view is that while we in a literary interpretation, *at bottom*, evoke our Wittgensteinian authority as sense-makers of language and literature, our Austinian authority may very well play an important part in our interpretive claim and capacity. As I see it, literary interpretation, as it is conducted by literary scholars, have both a Wittgensteinian and an Austinian aspect to it. On the one hand it may include substantial *expert knowledge*, and yet, on the other, literary interpretation is *potentially* open for *everyone* who knows the language, who can read, who enjoys reading imaginative literature, to enter and judge on the same footing what some stanza, passage, paragraph, metaphor, or other literary segment means. I take the boundary around the category of "everyone" here to be *necessarily blurry*.

I claim that these two authorities mix and overlap in scholarly, academic, literary interpretation. Sometimes this mixing and overlap happens in an unproblematic way. For instance, when we invoke both kinds of authority in an interpretation, but do so with respect to different matters. Sometimes they mix in a problematic and confused way, as when the interpreter tries to convince someone else by means of his or her Austinian authority on a matter that requires a Wittgensteinian appeal (as when an interpreter appeals to his or her *expertise* in a situation when the expertise is not relevant to settle the issue of what a linguistic datum can be read as meaningfully saying) or the other way around (as when an interpreter appeals to "how we can understand something as something" when expert knowledge is decisive). I think this overlap, and the fact that it is not always clear which kind of authority is required for which interpretive issue, can help to explain the palpable sense of *anxiety* that surrounds interpretive authority in making interpretations. This anxiety in turn will make it very tempting at times to make skeptical escapes to theory.

What I describe here as the difference between expertise or Austinian authority and criteria vs. Wittgensteinian authority and criteria, could be compared and partially contrasted with what Jonathan Culler describes as "literary competence." In *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) Culler writes:

> To read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for.
>
> Anyone lacking this knowledge, anyone wholly unacquainted with literature and unfamiliar with the conventions by which fictions are read, would, for example, be quite baffled if presented with a poem. His knowledge of the language would enable him to understand phrases and sentences, but he would not know, quite literally, what to *make* of this strange concatenation of phrases. He would be unable to read it *as* literature – as we say with emphasis to those who would use literary works for other purposes – because he lacks the complex 'literary competence' which enables others to proceed. He has not internalized the 'grammar' of literature which would permit him to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings. […] [A] knowledge of language will take one a certain distance in one's encounter with literary texts, and it may be difficult to specify precisely where understanding comes to depend on one's supplementary knowledge of literature. But the difficulty of drawing a line does not obscure the palpable difference between understanding the language of a poem, in the sense that one could provide a rough translation into another language, and understanding the poem.[295]

What Culler here describes as having "internalized the 'grammar' of literature," and to have "supplementary knowledge of literature" vs. a kind of general "knowledge of language" undeniably resembles the distinction I make between authority based on expertise vs. grammatical authority in interpretation. What Culler describes as the difficulty in "drawing a line" between what it is to know the language and what it is to be able to read a poem *as a poem*, is indeed a difficulty that speaks to what I am trying to articulate. But I would nevertheless say that I sense a slight difference in how we understand this difficulty, and perhaps also with respect to both the nature and the *width* of the "line" to be drawn between the one and the other – which I would rather picture as a quite wide, blurry, intermediate *zone* rather than a *line* – as well as, maybe, *what* that line (or zone) is taken to demarcate. Because when, today, children in developed countries learn a language, learning *how to read* is a normal and integral part of the process. And what they usually read when they start reading are different forms of literature. The fairytale and the lullaby are two such genres with which many children get acquainted early on. It is not only literary scholars, or critics, or authors, or other "experts" who know what a novel, or novella or poem is. Most literate people do. "Literary competence" – to some extent – is something you tend to acquire in the very process of learning a language, while becoming attuned to a certain culture and form of life. The latter is not usually "supplementary" in such a way that we have hordes of linguistically competent people who are at the same time *complete* strangers to literature. And

[295] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 113–114.

the line that causes anxiety about interpretation is predominantly not any line between literary experts on the one hand and those "wholly unacquainted with literature and unfamiliar with the conventions by which fictions are read" on the other. If there is an anxiety about a blurry line surrounding authority to note here then it is rather between literary experts and the – to some extent at least, *competent* and sometimes even well-read – "untrained student[s]" (to speak with Taylor).

So let me begin to differentiate what kind of questions in interpretation concern Austinian criteria (and therefore make appeals to expertise authority) from a species of questioning that concerns grammatical criteria (and appealing thereby to grammatical authority). In what sense is the literary scholar an *expert* in an Austinian sense, then? Certainly, during one's scholarly apprenticeship in the field of literary studies one learns a lot of specialized things. One learns facts about meter (what is an alexandrine, what is an hexameter, what is a sonnet, etc.?), one learns literary history and develops a professional vocabulary with specific definitions to internalize; particular methods or modes of reading (thematic readings, structural readings, biographical readings, comparative readings, etc.), which are regulated to some extent within the profession (since not everything counts as a "thematic reading," and so on). These things are generally not what "every" competent reader of literature in a culture "knows," so in these matters it is usually quite clear who is authoritative, for instance, in a teacher-student relation.

Fischer actually has a good example of this sort of situation when the question "How do you know?" has no skeptical implications because it is clearly posed as a *real* question in a teaching situation where a student is on its way to learn the criteria of certain concepts in literary studies – in this case learning what a pastoral is. For Fischer this case is supposed to work as the non-skeptical counterpoint to an "expert's" *skeptical* doubt of a "best case" of interpretation. However, as I have already argued, I do not think there is a "best" case of interpretation, and the fact that the supposed "best case" would be a best case of some *expert knowledge* furthermore strengthens my critique that Fischer does not adequately provide a best case of interpretation, the denial of which would lead to skepticism. Nonetheless, as an example of a *real* question, Fischer's example works fine. So let me return to Milton and the pastoral and to Fischer once more:

> "Milton is the author of *Lycidas*" or "*Lycidas* is a pastoral." I can imagine many times when critics might say such things, when, that is, these claims might count as remarks or assertions – for example, when introducing Milton to a high school class or defining a pastoral. […] In these contexts, asking "How do you know?" reflects the momentary uncertainty of a student trying to master something new (Milton or the definition of "pastoral"). Answering the question accordingly lessens the student's confusion, maybe ends it, as in the following exchange:

> TEACHER: *Lycidas* is a pastoral.
>
> STUDENT: How do you know?
>
> TEACHER: Because Milton borrows the imagery of a shepherd's life to lament the death of a friend.
>
> Even if this answer does not easily or instantly satisfy the questioner, additional questions (in this context) will suggest eventually remedial ignorance instead of leading to incorrigible skeptical doubt. At stake is not the possibility of saying anything valid about *Lycidas* (and thus any literary work), but the character of the individuals involved – the student's aptitude, for example, and the teacher's patience and skill.[296]

In this case I think it is pretty clear that the authority with which the teacher appeals when describing *Lycidas* as a pastoral, is of an Austinian variety. It is more or less on a par with the authority that the ornithologist possesses when saying that a goldfinch is a goldfinch. But knowing what is a pastoral is, as I said, not an instance of interpretation, even though, knowing what a pastoral is can be important when you interpret poems – especially so if the poem is a pastoral. This kind of knowledge gives you a more refined vocabulary of how to sort poems into genres, to see which belong together and to recognize when a poem is bending or twisting – perhaps even mocking – the conventions of a genre. All this might indeed be highly relevant for one's interpretation. To have a developed and deep knowledge of a genre to which a certain work belongs often profoundly shapes the very *Gestalt* the overall work takes in your interpretation – a *Gestalt* you may otherwise miss or be completely blind to if you are unfamiliar with the tradition of a particular genre. The very *way* the work places itself within the genre can also heavily affect how we see the internal relations of a determinate work – for example, how allusions and intertextual relations work with another and what possible patterns of meaning they create together. Likewise, when as a student of literature, one studies *narratology*, one learns different techniques for separating and analyzing narrative structures and functions, all of which can be useful in interpretation. One may learn to use these correctly or incorrectly. If one claims that in a certain novel there is an "external focalizer," and one claims to be using that concept as it is defined by Mieke Bal in *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, and then averts from that defini-

[296] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 30. Compare with the following passage from Wittgenstein where he differentiates between giving information and making skeptical claims and inquiries: "'A is a physical object' is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what 'A' means, or what 'physical object' means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and 'physical object' is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity,…) And that is why no such proposition as: 'There are physical objects' can be formulated. Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn." Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* § 36, p. 7e.

tion one is simply using that concept *erroneously*.[297] Such a failure may reveal that one is simply not an authoritative master of the Austinian criteria of focalization.

But if, on the other hand, one considers the overall reading, such as more generally the interpretation of the novel (or for whatever use the term focalization is employed *in order* to interpret), the authority of the interpretation relies on nothing more and nothing less than my capacity to read imaginative fiction. And this is a capacity the quality of which is *not necessarily* dependent on you (or me) having studied literature as an academic discipline, even if the study of literature obviously should have enhanced. In reading not only a lot, but doing so attentively, in trying to make good interpretations – whether in an academic or non-academic setting – the quality of your capacity as an "attentive" reader should increase. Not only, or predominantly, through your incorporation of specialized concepts and knowledge of genre, history and the like, but more profoundly through a *deepened* competence in the kind of thing that *every reader does anyway* and that your *practice* trains you in. Here I am stressing what happens through the practice of devotion and attention you give to literature. Hopefully you will undergo a change in *quality* as an interpreter, which is yet not necessarily a change in *kind*. (Though your increasing familiarity with interpretation and literature will of course probably change the sorts of questions you pose to the texts, the things you are able to see, the kinds of interests and interpretive goals you may possibly engage in etc.)

Now, is this way of advancing as a literary interpreter something specialized in an Austinian sense, or is it merely the continuation or a kind of *deepening* of your Wittgensteinian authority? I cannot help but want to say – it is both. In the professional advancement of literary interpretation you need authority in both sense. And though the "line," or intermediate zone between these modes of authority is necessarily wide and blurry, concerning some things it will be clear-cut whether your authority derives from expertise (such as your authority in judging focalization) or not. In acquiring your professional/Austinian authority, you have to make certain concepts and techniques of the profession *yours*. They become integral to your way of reading: you use them when you make out the meaning of something. The way they function and work is through their very practical employment in concrete interpretive work. This means that one's technical or specialized competence and knowledge are not abstract things one "knows" and that are merely "added" to one's "unschooled" capacity to read texts. Rather, in employing them, one naturally continues to read, to read in some *sense as one had before*, only now trying to do it better, deeper, to be more attentive when reading. Knowing what one does, possessing in some sense the Austini-

[297] See Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

an/expertise criteria of such things as genre conventions, meter, the history or tradition of a motif, etc. – a taxonomy of concepts and categories that one *is trained into* as a student (just like the ornithologist) – elements of this knowledge of these criteria, will play into one's *spontaneous* readings of literary works. They tend to present themselves *naturally* when relevant for one's overall interpretations.

This makes it hard to separate out what in one's knowledge of, say, a literary genre, has its derivation in one's reading of concrete literary works *of* this genre, and what has its source from reading academic discourses *about* this genre. Of course, in one's academic training one reads both, and together. Furthermore it seems equally difficult to try and separate one's literary and interpretive competence into the bits that stem from the knowledge one gets through *reading*, and the pieces that come from one's *practice in expressing* one's understanding through continuous interpretive *writing*. Interpretive competence is significantly something one learns by *doing*, through practice. And with the exception of critics and scholars few people *write* interpretations on a regular basis. Not everyone has the time, interest, or for that matter patience to commit oneself to the often pleasurable yet tantalizingly arduous work of figuring out and expressing how one understands a literary work.

Let me in this context return to Culler's discussion of literary competence and, specifically, to the contrast he draws between knowing a language and understanding a poem. Culler writes:

> Anyone who knows English understands the language of Blake's 'Ah! Sunflower':
>
> Ah, Sun-flower, weary of time,
> Who countest the steps of the Sun,
> Seeking after that sweet golden clime
> Where the traveller's journey is done:
>
> Where the Youth pined away with desire,
> And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow
> Arise from their graves, and aspire
> Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.
>
> But there is some distance between an understanding of the language and the thematic statement with which a critic concludes his discussion of the poem: 'Blake's dialectical thrust at asceticism is more than adroit. You do not surmount Nature by denying its prime claim of sexuality. Instead you fall utterly into the dull round of its cyclic aspirations.' How does one reach this reading? What are the operations which lead from the text to this representation of understanding? […] Such interpretations are not the result of subjective associations. They are public and can be discussed and justified with respect

> to the conventions of reading poetry – or, as English allows us to say, of *making sense*.[298]

I agree. And one important thing that Culler points out here – besides the crucial fact that interpretive claims are public, open for debate, sensitive to arguments and justifications – is the fact that there are conventions of reading poetry, not least academic conventions. But there are also academic conventions for how to *write* and argue for an interpretation. Among these Culler recounts the convention to "read the poem as expressing a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe" as well as what he calls the convention of metaphorical coherence, and the convention of thematic unity.[299] This is of course true. But is this not something we also do because a significant amount of poems and poetic traditions exhibit such attitudes, such coherence, such unity, and thus *invite* such readings? Which parts of the authority and "naturalness" of these "conventions" that resides *in the literature* and which that resides in the (academic) *criticism*, seem impossible to say with any higher degree of accuracy – nor is Culler trying to undertake such a task. On the contrary, he sees both parts as making possible "literary competence." My point, though, is that, on the question of interpretive authority, it can often be hard to separate what is "expert competence" and the competence that belongs to any devoted and attentive reader of literature – not least in the contexts of discussions and assessments of interpretive judgments and claims.

So under what interpretive circumstances can we rely merely on our grammatical authority of understanding language and literature, and when conversely is expert knowledge relevant or perhaps even crucial? This is a question I claim one cannot answer on a general level. It is a question we have to approach *piecemeal*. Whether expert knowledge is significant for an interpretive claim depends on *that* particular claim. We simply have to look, in each and every case, and see when it emerges as a *genuine* question; that is, when an overlap causes confusion and generates philosophical or critical difficulties.

Making assessments of certain (not all) interpretive claims requires expert knowledge. Once such Austinian concepts and techniques have been integrated and mastered, one may be able to question that criteria or, even, to take it upon oneself to further develop existing criteria. Doubtless, there will be continuous debate within literary studies, among the masters of that practice, whether this or that work really is *realist* or *symbolist*, *modernist*, or *postmodern*, or if this really is a *novel* or rather a very long *prose-poem*, etc.

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[298] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 115–116. The critic analyzing William Blake's poem is Harold Bloom. For reference to Bloom's text see Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 115, note 1, p. 269.
[299] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 115.

The blurry limit between Austinian and Wittgensteinian criteria is something I think essentially plays into that.

So while neither expert knowledge nor the blurriness itself necessarily constitutes a problem, or, indeed, the problem of skepticism, this blurriness can nonetheless *tempt* the literary scholar into a position of authoritarianism. I think this temptation becomes especially strong in situations of anxiety regarding authority, as is the case in occasional instances of a teacher-student-relation or during interpretive conflicts where one reader has a deep investment in a set of interpretive claims. To simply address the student-teacher-example here, the blurriness of it can be tricky because while there certainly are things that the teacher *clearly* commands more authority about than the student – namely those things requiring expert authority – it is fully possible that a "completely untrained student" may be a far better interpreter of literature than the teacher in matters of grammatical authority. In short: the student may simply be a more talented reader. He or she may have a greater capacity to make certain interesting connections, see specific patterns and relations in texts that can engender fruitful interpretations. And for a (bad) teacher this fact may be a source of anxiety, perhaps even resentment.

The temptation to appeal to one's expert authority in the midst of an interpretive conflict with a student (and of course this temptation can present itself in conflicts with interpretive peers as well) – even when the matter at hand does not at heart concern expert knowledge, but rather what *sense one can possibly see in this piece of language* – is the professional temptation to become *authoritarian*.[300] This temptation of authoritarianism is furthermore, I claim, a *skeptical temptation.* It becomes skeptical as soon as an attempt is made to disguise a matter of grammatical criteria and authority *as if* it were a matter of expert criteria and authority, and constitutes a failure on the part of the literary interpreter to shoulder one's own grammatical authority and responsibility in the right way. The escape to a purported expertise, through which one can claim superiority of judgment, is simultaneously an *avoidance* of the real problem at hand. It constitutes a *denial* of the grammar of the problem: a refusal to acknowledge the matter *as* concerning grammatical criteria.

However, in the context of the interpretation of literature, *both* students and teachers are at the end of the day "students." The roles of student and teacher can, from time to time, shift and turnaround. To admit that this can

[300] Of course there will also be cases where different forms of "expert knowledge" is necessary to make out the sense of a certain piece of literature. It depends upon what sort of question one poses to the text. If one is making a biographical or intentionalist reading, knowledge of what an author believed or meant in other contexts can be relevant for judging what he or she most likely meant *here*. This means that someone that lacks relevant biographical knowledge in such a case will probably be less authoritative to judge that particular matter than someone who is in possession of it. Similarly interpretations of old literature may require expert knowledge of what certain words meant at that time, in that culture, etc.

happen is not an assault on the teacher's "professional competence." Simply, it is an acknowledgement that not all of the teacher's competences are essentially of the "expertise" variety. The most important part – his or her overall ability to understand language and literature, his or her attunement to it, his or her musicality in using it – is not. It can be, and by all means hopefully has been, *cultivated* by her professional training – but it is not *taught* from scratch, as it were, within the course of that training.

3.4. Concluding Remarks

So what is interpretive skepticism? Let me begin this summary of my analysis of interpretive skepticism by first describing the interpretive skeptic.

The literary interpretive skeptic is not only a *Cartesian interpretive skeptic* who denies or doubts that we can separate valid interpretations from invalid ones, good interpretations from overinterpretations or misinterpretations; but also his or her *epistemological twin* who claims that we *can* indeed distinguish the valid interpretations from the invalid – as long as we have a theory that explains and grounds that distinction for us. Furthermore, the Cartesian variety of interpretive skepticism does not start from a "best case" of interpretation. This is what most clearly separates interpretive skepticism specifically from the general meaning skepticism or language skepticism of Kripke in chapter 2. Interpretive skepticism *has no* best case. Instead, part of its specific logic is that it tends to start off from a "hard case," which, if the Cartesian variant is followed through to its logical end, leads to a Kantian skeptical problematic as well.

But even if interpretive skepticism at bottom becomes a Kantian skepticism concerning criteria, the literary interpretive skeptic is not only a *Kantian interpretive skeptic* who denies or doubts that we are authoritative in using the concept of "interpretation," who moreover denies or doubts that we know the "being *so*" of literary interpretation and the criteria of interpretive validity. Just as skeptical is his or her *epistemological twin* who claims that we possess the authority to know what interpretation and interpretive validity are – as long as we have a theory that explains and grounds that criteria and authority for us.

This means that *literary interpretive skepticism* is found in the very idea that in order to secure literary interpretive practice, we need a theory that tells us *in advance*, before the risky act of making interpretations, what interpretation is, how it is possible, where the boundaries of validity run, what kinds of interpretations are legitimate, what logical categories are appropriate to evaluate interpretations in, etc. Such theoretical attempts to anticipate reading and interpretation are, however, I claim, actually attempts to *avoid* interpretation. They constitute escapes from both the practical *and* theoretical difficulties we may encounter *through* interpretive practice. Such skepti-

cal escapes to theory are simultaneously attempts both to avoid and transgress the interpretive *authority* and responsibility of the interpreter.

The interpretive claim is an *invitation* to the reader to see if he or she can see what I see in a text. Such an invitation is also a *claim to community* and shared intelligibility – and as such it is vulnerable to rejection or acknowledgement from my fellow-interpreters. However, this is a vulnerability that the interpretive epistemologist wishes to avoid by becoming authoritarian: by trying to set in advance the limits of sense-making in literary interpretation.

This does not mean, however, that all appeals to theory, or uses of theory, are skeptical, or that all theoretical investigations of the conditions and nature of interpretation, which may have some form of bearing on interpretive practice, are skeptical. We have to look and see – in each and every case – how the theory is used and what purpose it serves. Whether a theoretical enterprise is skeptical is something that one best investigates *piecemeal*.

On that note, the first part of this study has reached its end and I will now turn to the second part and my own specific test case of interpretive skepticism: New Criticism. In the following chapter I will first introduce New Criticism and demonstrate how its theorization on interpretation and literature (especially poetry) took shape in the light of a skeptical threat. In chapter 5 and 6 I will then investigate two seminal thinkers within the New Critical idiom: Monroe C. Beardsley and Cleanth Brooks. While Beardsley focuses on protecting academic *interpretation* against skepticism, Brooks is first and foremost concerned with protecting literature, and in particular *poetry*. For Beardsley the skeptical threat appears through suspicions of impressionism and relativism in academic interpretation. Through his epistemological attempts to condemn "the intentional fallacy," Beardsley becomes both a skeptical twin about interpretation and a straightforward literary skeptic about other minds. Brooks, for his part, is trying to save poetry from accusations of being merely imagined sense. In this process, his argument about the "the heresy of paraphrase" turns him into a skeptical twin about poetic meaning and a straightforward skeptic regarding poetic interpretation.

However, what makes New Criticism especially interesting as a test case of interpretive skepticism, is that it contains fruitful interpretive and philosophical *resistance* to interpretive skepticism too. In my investigation of Brooks, I will argue that *close reading*, through its encouragement to "look and see" as a response to suspicions of nonsensicality, or overinterpretation, reveals a piecemeal approach to poetic and interpretive skepticism, which I find to be helpful in itself as well as resonating well with Cavell's philosophy.

In Chapter 7, the final chapter of the book, I will leave the confines of the New Critical test case and take a broader view of skeptical problems in the tradition of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Through readings of Susan Sontag, Cora Diamond, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and J.M. Coetzee, I will argue

that suspicious or paranoid interpretations, spurred by existential, moral and political concerns, can also become skeptical through dogmatic commitments to wider suspicious theories.

Chapter 4: New Criticism, Modernism, and the Rise of Theory

With the beginning of this chapter the present study now reaches the start of the second part of my investigation. From here onwards the analysis of interpretive skepticism, and its structure (as worked out in chapter 3), will be deployed in order to investigate interpretive skepticism as it shows itself within New Criticism. This chapter is designed to serve principally as a sort of general background for chapters 5 and 6. There I will investigate in greater detail New Critical interpretive skepticism, especially as it unfolds in the canonical works of Monroe C. Beardsley and Cleanth Brooks.

In this chapter I want to place Beardsley's and Brooks' concerns with interpretive and poetic skepticism within the context of the New Critical tradition. As I mentioned in chapter 3, Michael Fischer singles out New Criticism as the main victim of what he sees as deconstructive, skeptical thought. While he discusses how the New Critics used different types of metaphors to describe the organic unity of the literary work (like "plants," "verbal icons," "well-wrought urns," etc.), he seems to find the New Critics' descriptions of the literary work – in contrast to the deconstructionists' – more or less theoretically innocent.[301] Likewise, (but without linking his conception of skepticism to Cavell) Eugene Goodheart, in his *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* (1984), contrasts the New Critics with what he considers to be the skeptical deconstructionists. Goodheart writes:

> What distinguishes the deconstructive view from the familiar romantic view of the figural deviousness, richness, and even inadequacy of language is its suspicion (indeed, conviction) that *nothing* underlies the differential play of tropes. It is not simply that language and meaning do not coincide. Meaning, or at least literal meaning, turns out to be an illusion. Such a view depends not only on skepticism about the reliability of language, but about its substantiality as well.[302]

Goodheart compares this view with what he calls the New Critics' "belief in the presence of texts. Texts are structures of worlds, plentitudes of meaning.

[301] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, pp. 10–35.
[302] Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism*, pp. 136–137.

These meanings can be interpreted and the conditions that generate them can be studied."[303]

If Goodheart is right in contrasting the deconstructionists' "disbelief" with the New Critics' "belief" in the meaningfulness of poetry, then this only serves to strengthen my thesis that New Criticism also holds skeptical views.[304] What I want to argue in this second part of the book is that (at least some) New Critical conceptions of the literary work and its meaningfulness are much more closely linked to skepticism than Goodheart's and Fischer's renderings otherwise indicate. My argument here though will not be that the New Critics were *straightforward* interpretive skeptics; what I want to demonstrate instead is how skepticism, in various forms, *was seen as that which had to be overcome and to be falsified*, so that literary interpretation could be made a rational and cognitively respectable practice. Among the New Critics certain proponents share with the interpretive skeptic the basic conception that unless a theory of literary interpretation is presented (that can say how and why interpretation is possible and valid) then the possibility of interpretation is really something that just hangs in the air. The impact of skeptical reasoning on New Criticism is thus mainly of a negative kind. The New Critical skeptics, to the extent we find them at all, are predominantly skeptical twins, *epistemologists*, in Cavell's sense.

Now, even if all this is true, (and that it is true needs to be shown) why should we bother at all with the New Critics, and *their* skeptical problems, today? New Criticism began to exert its influence a couple of decades into the 20th Century and was more or less deposed as the ruling theoretical perspective by the middle of the 1960s. It can hardly be considered very "new" anymore. Since then, the boom of "Theory" has given us Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Feminism and Gender studies, Post Colonialism, Deconstruction, Queer theory, New Historicism, Eco criticism, etc. – all offering new theoretical renderings of the logic, limits and nature of literary interpretation. Is not New Criticism so severely outmoded that little is to be gained by returning to the New Critics today?

In *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism* (2008), William Logan seems in part to admit that "[t]o look back at the New Critics is to indulge in a nostalgia for the days when books were books and not 'texts'."[305] The way he continues, however, suggests that he considers such nostalgia to be quite eligible. Or rather, that after decades of theory devotion, there is something

[303] Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism*, p. 7.
[304] I am not here addressing the issue whether this is true or whether it is a too sweeping generalization about the practice and practitioners of deconstruction. In my view it is at least a fitting description for *some* deconstructionists.
[305] William Logan, "Forward into the Past: Reading the New Critics," *Praising it New: The Best of New Criticism*, ed. Garrick Davis (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2008), p. xiii.

beyond that vague feeling of nostalgia that demands a renewed interest in New Criticism. Logan writes:

> ([W]hen critics natter on about "dialogic intertextuality" in *Batman*, my eyes glaze over). Beyond the holy trinity of race, class, and gender; beyond the murder of the author (hardly the death of him); beyond the jargon-ridden, vatic, riddling "methodologies" fond of sophomoric wordplay and genial mystification (recall how Pound despised "critics who use vague terms to *conceal* their meaning"), contemporary theory remains largely inoculated against the way poems work. In the end, it is a very dull way to look at poetry. Despite its pretense of dispassion, theory – which often lies in a fog of unfinished philosophy – turns out to be surprisingly judgmental.[306]

I do not share Logan's quite sweeping disdain here, neither for "methodologies" in general, nor for the proliferation of critical focus on gender- class- and race issues in literature studies. On the contrary, I think such perspectives both have been, and still are, highly important and relevant for literary studies. The frustrated tone that the quote above strikes might come through, not merely as "nostalgia" (as Logan himself anticipates) but worse, as having the ring of arrogance, privilege and conservatism about it, indicating on Logan's part an utter unwillingness for self-criticism. I am not sure though whether such a reading of this passage would be fair to Logan. The frustration expressed might very well stem from something I recognize and share – a sense that theory too often uses literature merely as a pretext for unproductive self-indulgence; that it too often turns into dogmatism and pure ideology; that it too often is applied more or less *mechanically* onto a literary object with uninteresting and predictable results; and perhaps most importantly: that too much theory being done today contains an abundance of theoretical *mystifications* – or to use Logan's words, that too much theory creates, or takes place in, "a fog of unfinished philosophy." This suspicion of mystification is something I will discuss more specifically with respect to the suspicion of "fraudulence" in chapter 6, and in chapter 7 the problem of theoretical dogmatism will take center stage. Nonetheless, I think, as perhaps Logan does, that the New Criticism is a good place to start unpacking this sense of theoretical mystification. And this I shall do for mainly two reasons.

First of all, to return to New Criticism is in a sense to go back to where it all started. New Criticism and Russian Formalism (with which it has many affinities) are generally considered to be the first *modern* theoretical movements in literary studies, of the kind we have today. Being in some sense "the beginning," New Criticism played a significant part in shaping what we now recognize as "theory" in literary studies. This means that later movements, including those that directly dispute New Criticism, respond to their ways of formulating the problems of (what later became) "Theory." I think

[306] Logan, "Forward into the Past: Reading the New Critics," p. xiii.

Michael Fischer is right when he says that "[d]espite some reports to the contrary, the death of the New Criticism has been greatly exaggerated. Much recent theory remains not only indebted to the New Criticism but often in dialogue with it, using the New Critics' terms as points of departure."[307] In fact, even in discussions of "theory after theory," New Criticism is often considered the natural starting point.[308] Consequently, if New Criticism is deeply shaped by interpretive skepticism (or the threat of it), it is then likely that later theoretical orientations can share a similar condition. Thus, there might be lessons of a more wide-ranging nature to learn from studying the New Critics' response to skeptical threats.

Secondly, New Criticism is a natural place to start rethinking the relation between interpretive theory and interpretive practice. In New Criticism one sees quite an ambivalent attitude towards theorizing, especially the kind of theorization which tries to make criticism more "scientific." I will invoke two contexts as particularly important for a discussion about the relationship between interpretive theory and practice in New Criticism. The first is *the advent of literary modernism* and the particular difficulties it posed for criticism. The second is certain theoretical influences from discussions about meaningfulness and language which were prominent at the beginning of the 20th Century, during the so called *linguistic turn* in philosophy.

The New Criticism has for a long time suffered academic disfavor. In Frank Lentricchia's *After New Criticism* (1980), New Criticism is characterized as an "inconsistent and sometimes confused movement" considered to be completely "dead – in an official sense, of course […] dead in the way that an imposing and repressive father-figure is dead."[309] However, as Douglas Mao points out in "The New Critics and the Text-Object" (1996), some fifteen years later, "[i]t is presently a commonplace among scholars and teachers of literature that the New Criticism is, and has been for decades now, both dead and alive. As a set of techniques for reading […] it continues to exercise an enormous influence on teachers."[310] It is not only in terms of its practical legacy, though, that New Criticism remains influential, some scholarly interest has lingered and can even be said to have grown stronger in the past two decades.[311]

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[307] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 10.
[308] See for instance Nicholas Birns, *Theory after Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* (Peterborough and New York: Broadview Press, 2010), pp. 11–18.
[309] Frank Lentricchia, "Preface," *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. xii–xiii.
[310] Douglas Mao, "The New Critics And The Text-Object," *English Literary History*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (1996), p. 227.
[311] Especially through the so-called New Formalism movement, see Heather Dubrow, "Foreword," *New Formalisms and Literary Theory,* eds. Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. ix.

One early example of this is the anthology *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuity* (1995) edited by William J. Spurlin and Michael Fischer, which contains both classical New Critical texts as well as new interpretations of the movement and its legacy. The volume "seriously questions the current delegitimization of the New Criticism and explores possible relationships and continuities between New Criticism and contemporary theoretical concerns."[312] In a similar way, two more (rather) recent volumes devoted to New Criticism, *Close Reading: The Reader* (2003), edited by Frank Lentricchia and Andrew Dubois, and *Rereading the New Criticism* (2012), edited by Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre, propose a more complex and nuanced rendering of New Criticism and its heritage than the standard picture of a thoroughly superseded formalism. *Close Reading's* ambition is "to represent and undercut" what the authors "take to be the major clash in the practice of literary criticism in the past century: that between so-called formalist and so-called nonformalist (especially 'political') modes of reading."[313] This means, on the one hand, to acknowledge and shed light on specific achievements of formalism and, on the other, to investigate and contest the very boundary itself: showing how the two different modes of criticism have more in common than one would otherwise think. *Rereading the New Criticism* is in a related way devoted to the shattering of a simplified picture of New Criticism as a "monolithic school of thought" and its authors wish to dispel the "widely circulated repertoire of myths" that has surrounded it, for instance that New Criticism was "ahistorical, apolitical, and acontextual."[314]

This tendency to contest traditional versions of New Critical formalism while at the same time calling for a renewed interest in *form*, is characteristic for the so-called *New Formalism*. New Formalism is probably at present the most significant testimony that New Criticism is not outdated, irrelevant and dead in literary studies. However, as Ellen Rooney points out in her "Form and Contentment" (2000), the label itself is anything but new. It was sometimes used to characterize the New Critics, not least in the context of chastising them for their "formal embellishments."[315] In *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (2013), Fredric V. Bogel characterizes the relation between the "new" New Formalists and the "old" New Formalists in the following way:

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[312] William Spurlin, "Introduction: The New Criticism in Contemporary Theory," *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities*, eds. William J. Spurlin and Michael Fischer (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1995), p. xix.
[313] Andrew DuBois and Frank Lentricchia, "Preface," *Close Reading: The Reader*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. ix.
[314] Miranda Hickman, "Introduction. Rereading the New Criticism," in *Rereading the New Criticism*, eds. Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), pp. 4–5.
[315] Ellen Rooney, "Form and Contentment," *Modern Language Quarterly,* Vol. 61, No. 1 (March 2000), p. 18, note 1.

> Historically, New Formalism grows out of the New Criticism of the 1920s, 1930s, and after, a "school" to which later formalisms are profoundly indebted and toward which they also adopt an inescapably revisionist posture. […] But New Formalism goes well beyond the activity of differentiating itself from the New Criticism. For one thing, it rethinks the nature and significance of textual tensions, contradictions, and disharmonies; it displays a new concern with issues of power and politics; and it focuses energetically on cultural and political significances of form.[316]

This means that while the *new* New Formalists want to reinstall an interest in the notion of form, they do so in dialogue with critical positions and other commitments that are standardly seen as the very opposite of formalism. If William Logan turns to New Criticism because he is frustrated with "the holy trinity of race, class, and gender," the New Formalists tend to, on the contrary, stress the mutual benefits of letting the practice of close reading and the theoretical proclivities of cultural studies inform one another. Rooney formulates the New Formalist agenda in the following way:

> To recover the category and the work of form in literary and cultural studies is thus not to transcend the New Historicism, post-structuralism, cultural materialism, feminism, semiotics, postcolonialism, or any of the other critical interventions marking literary studies in the late twentieth century. Rather, the renewal of form as an operation intrinsic to reading enables literary and cultural studies fully to take the pressure of those inventions.[317]

New Formalist approaches not only allow for a fruitful exchange between cultural studies and literary formalism. As Caroline Levine observes in her championing of a "strategic formalism," a "close[er] look at both" cultural studies and traditional literary formalism "suggest that the New Criticism was never *only* abstract and universalizing, just as cultural studies is never *only* concrete and particular."[318] The exchange between the two, which the New Formalists wish to facilitate, has to some extent been there all along.[319]

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[316] Fredric V. Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9. For more on New Formalism, see also the aforementioned *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* as well as *Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002); *Reading for Form*, eds. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2006); *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*, ed. Stephen Cohen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

[317] Rooney, "Form and Contentment," p. 18.

[318] Caroline Levine, "Strategic Formalism: Towards a New Method in Cultural Studies," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Summer 2006), p. 632.

[319] Susan J. Wolfson writes in a special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly*, in March 2000, an issue subsequently published in book-form as *Reading for Form* (2006), that "in the wake of deconstruction and its evolution into New Historicism, there has persisted a formalist criticism, not burrowed in retreat in new critical streambeds but invigorated by and challenging the modern currents." Susan J. Wolfson, "Reading for Form," *Modern Language Quarterly,* Vol. 61, No. 1 (March 2000), p. 7.

While here and in the next two subsequent chapters, my investigation turns toward New Criticism as a test case of interpretive skepticism and not on New Criticism as such, I have no qualms if some will take my critical reading as contributing to the renewed interest presently being shown in the New Criticism, which I think is well deserved. Furthermore, as will perhaps become most obvious in chapters 6 and 7, my own view of combining New Critical close reading with theoretical insights from other critical and theoretical traditions, greatly resembles the position adopted by New Formalism. While I shall resist the urge to champion any specific critical orientation as being the most productive and soundest for literary interpretation, I nonetheless share the New Formalists' conviction that much is to be gained through reclaiming interpretive insights from the "old" New Formalists. Especially, I argue, in the context of investigating not only the problem of interpretive skepticism but also how this problem can possibly be overcome.

4.1. The New Criticism

The New Criticism, which commanded its greatest influence on the academic teaching of literature (especially in the United States and Great Britain) from about the mid-1920s to the early 1960s, was never a homogenous movement that neither marched under a single banner nor were held together by any common agenda. Some of the New Critics were philosophers, others were literary scholars, while many were poets also.[320] This differentiation naturally shaped their interests and resulted in their intellectual inclinations taking different directions. As one of its proponents, Allen Tate, writes: "Without *The Kenyon Review* in the past ten years I doubt we should have the New Criticism; for it was Mr. Ransom who created its myth by giving it a name. […] I do not know what the New Criticism is, […] I merely acknowledge the presence of the myth."[321] Murray Krieger, whose *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956) is both an appreciative and theoretically scrutinizing work on New Criticism, confirms this complex picture when he asks: "Is there no such thing, then, as 'the new criticism'? Very likely there are no aesthetically meaningful defining qualities which allow us both to call a man a 'new critic' and to include all those who have gone by that name."[322]

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[320] "Of those associated with the New Criticism – in the American South (John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren), in England (I.A. Richards, William Empson, and F.R. Leavis), and elsewhere (Yvor Winters, R.P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, and William K. Wimsatt) – all but Wimsatt and Brooks were published poets." Garrick Davis, "The Golden Age of Poetry Criticism," *Praising it New*, p. xxiii.

[321] Allen Tate, "A Note on Critical 'Autotelism'" (1949), *Essays of Four Decades* (1959) (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1968), p. 169.

[322] Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956) (London: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 5.

This might explain the slight ambiguity with regard to which names we should merely associate with New Criticism, or consider as its predecessors, and which can we say belong to the movement outright. Besides *The Kenyon Review* (founded by Ransom in 1939), journals like *The Southern Review* (founded by Brooks and Warren 1935), and The *Sewanee Review* (where Tate became editor in 1944), were also important sites of New Critical debate, and could in part be seen as defining who the New Critics were.[323] Names usually connected with New Criticism are I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, W.K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, René Wellek, Austin Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Yvor Winters, Allen Tate, and R.P. Blackmur.[324] What brings these critics together is their focus on the literary text itself, especially on its formal elements, as well as their collective rejection of traditional biographical, historical, and philological methods in literary studies and criticism.

The New Critics tended to criticize Romantic poetry and aesthetics. In his introduction to *The Sacred Wood* (1921) Eliot does not hesitate to call Byron "empty of matter," Shelly "incoherent," and Wordsworth "wanting in completeness and variety."[325] Instead, the New Critics generally championed the metaphysical poets, in particular John Donne; it is probably fair to say here that the New Critics were responsible for the huge and, appreciative revaluation of the metaphysical poets.[326] In Brooks's "The Modern Poet and the Tradition" we can see how such defense of the metaphysical poets is also intimately entwined with a defense of modernist poets and poetry. In this essay, Brooks is trying to show that even if "modern poetry is still regarded by the overwhelming majority as on principle anti-traditional" this is a mistake grounded in the misconception that "the tradition is to be understood as

[323] Hickman, "Introduction: Rereading the New Criticism," p. 13. Ransom also edited the volume *The Kenyon Critics: Studies in Modern Literature from the Kenyon Review* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1951), in which many prominent New Critics can be found, such as Robert Penn Warren, Austin Warren, W.H. Auden, William Empson, R.P. Blackmur, and Cleanth Brooks.

[324] In Ransom's *The New Criticism*, R.P. Blackmur is devoted an extensive preface, but the critics analyzed in the book, *as* New Critics, are I.A. Richards, William Empson, T.S. Eliot, and Yvor Winters. See John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (1941) (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1979).

[325] T.S. Eliot, "Introduction," *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), p. x. Likewise, Winters claimed that "The Romantic Theory of literature and of human nature has been the dominant theory in western civilization for about two and a half centuries. Its influence is obviously disastrous in literature and is already dangerous in other departments of human life." Yvor Winters, "A Foreword," *In Defense of Reason* (1937) (Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1947), p. 9.

[326] See for instance Brooks, "The Language of Paradox", *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1947), and "Notes for a Revisited History of English Poetry," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) (London: Poetry London, 1948), Allen Tate, "A Note on Donne" (1932) and "The Point of Dying: Donne's 'Virtuous Men'" (1952), both in *Essays of Four Decades*, William Empson, chapter IV, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953).

meaning 'Victorianism'."[327] Brooks argues that if we instead see how modernist poets like Eliot, Tate, Ransom, and Warren (all of whom were New Critics) instead draw upon the tradition from Donne, it becomes obvious that this is simply not true.[328]

The New Critics have often been accused of being too radically antihistorical and anachronistic: with their focus on "'ambiguity,' 'paradox,' 'complex of attitudes,' and most frequent of all […] – 'irony'," the New Critics read the metaphysical poets *as if* they were modernists.[329] Ransom, Tate, and Warren were part of the literary group called "the Fugitives" in the beginning of the 1920s, a group which in the 1930s turned into "the Agrarians," of which Brooks also became a member. Since "the Agrarians" defended conservative ideals about the South, suspicious of what they saw as the socially progressive, materialists in the industrial North, the New Critics' literary and aesthetic sensibilities in criticism have been considered to carry within them political conservatism.[330]

Within such a motley crew, it is not surprising to find both theoretically charged and more or less theoretically neutral approaches to criticism. In historical overviews and handbooks on literary theory, New Criticism is sometimes described not as a theoretical movement but closer to "an empirical methodology that was, at its most basic and most influential, a reading practice."[331] One thus gets the impression that "[i]n the New Criticism, theory remained in the background, as a tactful regulator of the activity of practical criticism."[332] On such occasions it is the more *pedagogical* aspects of New Criticism that are emphasized – for example, that the New Critics were devoted to developing first of all a teachable criticism. One may here think of in particular I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* (1929), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938), or W.K. Wimsatt and Brooks' *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957). At other times, however, it is its theoretical contribution that carries greater weight: for example, that the New Criticism was one of the first more systematic, academic, theoretical movements in literary studies, profoundly shaping what we recognize as literary *theory* today – Patricia Waugh, for instance, calls Wellek and Warren's *The Theory of Literature* (1949) the "first systematic theoretical book on literary studies."[333] Both the pedagogical and theoretical features are of course important and interlinked in the New Critical tradition.

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[327] Cleanth Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. 75.
[328] Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition."
[329] Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 195.
[330] Stephen Matterson, "The New Criticism," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 169.
[331] Matterson, "The New Criticism," p. 166.
[332] Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism*, p. 5.
[333] Patricia Waugh, "Introduction: Criticism, Theory, and Anti-Theory," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 1.

It was in the late 1920s that a "new" view on criticism was beginning to take shape; criticism was becoming something more intimately bound up with academic scholarship.[334] This tendency of wishing to bring art criticism into the hub of the academy, so as to make it more "scholarly," was not unique to the criticism of literature. By the forties and fifties, music-, art- and literary criticism had all developed into academic activities with scholarly ambitions. Nevertheless, according to Richard Shusterman, "[l]iterary criticism seemed to represent the most developed of such 'scientific' critical disciplines, and not surprisingly analytic aestheticians most frequently and closely concerned themselves with it."[335] The New Criticism played a significant role in making literary studies systematic, both theoretically and methodologically – and in this sense you could also say more "scientific" – by asking some fundamental questions about the *nature* of literature. However, New Criticism's relation to theory, especially theory which took as its model the natural sciences, was quite ambivalent.

The New Critics' call to *return to the text itself* is not controversial at all if taken as no more than a practical encouragement. Indeed, such an injunction seems to lack theoretical impact. It actively encourages the idea that if one wants to know what a literary work means one needs to meticulously study the work. But this is something that hardly any theorists of interpretation would oppose, whether they are intentionalists, reader-response-theorists or New Critics. What at least some of the New Critics meant by returning to the text was something, as they saw it, more fundamental. Because how *can* one return to the work itself, if one does not know what the work itself *is*, i.e. if one cannot tell what counts as true features of the work, what its real properties are, etc? In other words, must you not be able to distinguish the limits of the work, and separate what truly belongs to it, what is really *there* from what comes from the outside and is projected *as if* it were a part of the work?

Thus, in Wellek and Warren's *The Theory of Literature* a central question is: "What is the 'real' poem; where should we look for it; how does it exist? A correct answer to these questions should solve several critical problems and open a way to the proper analysis of a work of literature."[336] Beardsley asks similarly in his *Aesthetics* (1958): "What sort of thing are we referring to when we speak, for example, of *The Rape of the Lock* […] what are we talking about? If we are not sure, we are likely to talk about different things

[334] Spurlin, "Introduction: The New Criticism in Contemporary Theory," p. xvii. See also: Chris Baldick, "Literature and the Academy," *Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 85–95.
[335] Richard Shusterman, "Introduction: Analysing Analytic Aesthetics," *Analytic Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 7.
[336] René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (1949) (Middlesex and Victoria: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 142.

without knowing it, and this doesn't make for fruitful discussion."[337] What I claim one can see here, is not just a reaction *against* an old philological or romantic reading practise, or just the championing of a new one. I claim that one can glean from the above quotes a growing sense of a critical *skeptical* crisis: how can "fruitful discussion" and "proper analysis" in criticism be possible *at all* if we do not know "[w]hat sort of thing we are referring to" when we talk about literature? How can we present intellectually sound arguments in an academic context if we cannot say what "the 'real' poem is" and how it exists? The New Critics are thus speaking to a sense of disorientation; somehow we no longer know (or perhaps never knew) what literature is. The New Critics are drawn into an ambit of fundamental questions about the *nature* of literature and poetry since that nature is no longer something which can be taken for granted.

It is precisely with these concerns that I think one sees the theorizing of interpretation taking form as a response to a skeptical threat. This threat has both a Cartesian and a Kantian side, both of which are interrelated: from the Cartesian side, the preponderant question is what are the *real* features of the literary work? And from the Kantian vantage point, the principal question is what are the true *criteria* of interpretive validity? Both these questions meet in the New Criticism's obsession with defining the literary *object*. What I want to turn my attention to now is not that New Criticism was concerned with the nature of the literary object – a fact in no need of argumentation since it is a well-known commonplace about New Criticism – but to suggest an important reason *why* they were thus concerned.[338]

A central goal for New Criticism was to define the literary – in particular the poetic – object correctly in order to create a *method* of reading, adjusted to its true nature: to read *poetry as poetry*, and not as something *else*. It was fundamental for the validity of literary interpretation to get a clear view of the *ontology* of the literary work, in order to draw out the necessary epistemological features of interpretation.[339] The "else" here would be anything that supposedly leads to outside the poem, such as either the author's biography or the historical context. This textual stringency is illustrated when Brooks writes: "I believe that ultimately, if we are to deal with poems as poems, we shall have to show how the attitudes reveal themselves in the poems," which means, for him, that he is "not primarily interested in historical or psychological generalizations about the poet's mind."[340] Likewise

[337] Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958) (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1981), pp. 15–16.
[338] It will be in chapter 5 that I will in particular investigate the skeptical implications of conceptualizing the literary work as an *object* in Beardsley's theorizing on interpretation.
[339] This kind of thinking is usually called *objectivism*. See, for instance Margolis discussing it in, Joseph Margolis, *Selves and Other Texts: The Case for Cultural Realism (*University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 15, p. 108.
[340] Cleanth Brooks, "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism," *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 225.

when Tate claims: "The historical method will not permit us to develop a critical instrument for dealing with works of literature *as existent objects*; we see them as expressive of substances beyond themselves. […] [T]he work expresses its place and time, or the author's personality."[341] This does not necessarily mean, which is commonly thought of the New Critics, that they completely discarded history or context. If, for example, one listens to Tate it is rather the case that "in neither Empson nor Cleanth Brooks is history left out; [*but*] it ceases to appear methodologically; it no longer devours the literary text; it survives as contributory knowledge."[342]

4.2. New Criticism's Ambivalence toward the Idea of a Scientific Criticism

While the New Critics undoubtedly contributed to making literary studies more systematic and academic, they remained nevertheless quite ambivalent surrounding the aim to render criticism more "scientific."[343] One can begin to unpack the relationship between the practical purpose of construing a teachable criticism in the academy, and the theoretical ambition to uncover the nature of literature and criticism, by turning to Allan Tate.

In his essay "Is Literary Criticism Possible?" Tate sets out to discuss two questions: what role the teaching of literary criticism has or should have in the humanities, and whether "literary criticism is possible at all?" As Tate then comments, the second question should logically precede the former because "we ought to know what it is we are trying to relate to something else." The problem is, according to Tate, that we cannot "*define* literary criticism" and thus we suffer the unsettling condition "that in teaching criticism we do not know what we are teaching."[344] According to Tate there is a double denotation as to *what* it is we do not know when we teach criticism: "We must bear in mind not only our failure to know what criticism is, but another, more difficult failure resulting from it: the failure to know what literature is."[345] These are, I would say, questions operating on the Kantian level of criteria, questions Cavell would characterize as questions of something "be-

[341] Allen Tate, "Miss Emily and the Biographer," (1941), *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory*, pp. 11–12. My italics.
[342] Tate, "A Note on Critical 'Autotelism'," p. 169. See also Cleanth Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," *The Well Wrought Urn*.
[343] A common misunderstanding or simplification of the New Critics' views on this matter can be exemplified by Shirley F. Staton, who writes that the "New Critics […] see a literary work as an independent object with laws of its own which can be experienced and studied scientifically.", Shirley F. Staton, "Introduction: Pre-Text, Con-Text, and Sub-Text," *Literary Theories in Praxis*, ed. Shirley F. Staton (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), p. 3.
[344] Allen Tate, "Is Literary Criticism Possible?" (1951), *Essays of Four Decades*, p. 30.
[345] Tate, "Is Literary Criticism Possible?" p. 35.

ing *so*." The Kantian skeptical problematic here, exemplified by Tate's statement, is the concern that we might not have sufficient authority to say what the meanings of "literature" and "criticism" respectively *are*.

Yvor Winters writes along similar lines when he contends: "It behoves us to discover the nature of artistic literature, what it does, how it does it, and how one may evaluate it. It is one of the facts of life, and quite as important a fact as atomic fission."[346] Winters's comparison between criticism and atomic fission bears witness to the side of New Criticism that yearned for literary studies to be more like the natural sciences. The ambivalence towards theory, and science, in New Criticism becomes palpable once one compares Tate with Winters. In Winters one sees not only a theorizing which aims at providing criticism with more scientific rigor, but also a theorizing which places similar demands of rationality on *poetry*.[347]

Tate, on the other hand, regardless of his call for clearer theoretical definitions of literature and criticism, is more hesitant about how far the theoretical ambition of "scientificity" should reach in criticism. In an essay called "A Note on Critical 'Autotelism'" Tate writes: "I am suspicious of all critical generalizations, of those I have intemperately made in the past, and of the one that I am about to make. When insights into the meanings of a work become methodology, when the picture apologizes to the frame, we get what has been called autotelic criticism. It exists."[348] Only a few pages further down in "Is Literary Criticism Possible?" he also asks: "If criticism undertakes the responsibility and privilege of a strict theory of knowledge" will there not be a risk that the critic merely offers a "report of a quarrel between the imagined life of the work and his own 'philosophy'?"[349] In Tate one can thus see the worry that a criticism too preoccupied with theory might in fact turn away from the literary works themselves, and therefore not be in a position to sharpen the conceptual tools to deal with them. Here Tate exhibits, in my view, nothing other than the healthy fear surrounding the risk that literary criticism might, what I have called, *escape to theory*.

There are undoubtedly some attempts among the New Critics to make interpretation more "scientific." T.S. Eliot's idea of an "objective correlative," is a good case in point. In his famous essay on *Hamlet*, Eliot introduces the objective correlative as a form of interpretive criterion. He writes:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when

[346] Winters, "A Foreword," *In Defense of Reason*, p. 7.
[347] This seems at least to be how Brooks views Winters's requirement that successful poems should be possible to paraphrase into rational statements. I will return to this issue to this in 6.2.
[348] Tate, "A Note on Critical 'Autotelism'," p. 170.
[349] Tate, "Is Literary Criticism Possible?" p. 42.

> the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. If you examine any of Shakespeare's more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skillful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions […]. [T]his is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear.[350]

In Eliot's proposal one finds something of an empiricist quest for a causal relation between the "external facts" in the literary work (mediated through sensory experience of the characters within the fictive world of the play) and a particular emotion lodged in the fictive character that is then communicated to the reader. The criterion of an objective correlative expresses a desire for objectivity in literature and interpretation clearly modeled on the natural sciences. Just like the mixing of certain substances in a test tube will inevitably (if the ingredients and conditions are right) cause a certain observable chemical reaction, Eliot proposes that certain emotions and psychological reactions in literature should be possible to causally link to a given "set of objects", "situation[s]", and "chain of events" within the work. Hamlet's emotional reaction to Gertrude's marriage to his uncle is in light of this view greatly exaggerated: "the facts" of the play *do not warrant* Hamlet's outpouring of emotion, according to Eliot. Eliot's claim to certainty of judgment would, for him at least, be sustained and supported by his idea of an "objective correlative." The play is in this particular respect a failure: *the facts of the play* do not allow for such a reaction as Hamlet's.[351]

In their *Theory of Literature,* Wellek and Warren argue that literary studies has to find its own rationality and methods, not simply try to mimic the natural sciences. Not unlike Tate, Wellek and Warren claim that literary studies should be careful not to embrace too general accounts of literature, nor ought it to search for the discovery of simple laws (akin to the laws of nature or physical laws), since the particularity or uniqueness of the works under investigation would easily evade our eyes. Nonetheless, Wellek and Warren believe in a harmonious balance between generality and particularity in the study of literature, according to which the identification of intrinsic common literary features is taken to be a fruitful way to enhance the inter-

[350] T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Sacred Wood*, p. 92.

[351] There are of course quite important contrasts between a lab situation and the interpretive situation, which thereby make any appeal to an "objective correlative" a poor method of interpretive argumentation. Not only will the critic have to *judge* him- or herself whether or not the (emotional) reaction in the character *is* warranted by the "situation[s]," "chain of events," ands "set of objects," as these occur in the play. This in turn means that different critics may very well reach different conclusions while appealing to the very same "correlatives." Furthermore, in literature what the situation[s]," "chain of events," "set of objects," or their internal relation and significance actually *are,* is rarely simply *given*. These too, will often need to be assessed through an interpretive act, by means of critical judgments.

pretations of particular works.[352] "Literary criticism and literary history both attempt to characterize the individuality of a work […] [b]ut this characterization can be accomplished only in universal terms, on the basis of literary theory. Literary theory, an *organon* of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship today."[353]

This "great need" should be seen in light of Wellek and Warren's ambition to demonstrate that literature actually *could* be treated in a scholarly manner and *could* yield knowledge, not merely cause the reader noncognitive pleasure. The question *whether* literature is a possible object of scholarly knowledge at all was thus not something the New Critics could take for granted. And, as I will discuss more fully in my treatment of Brooks, nor could the New Critics take for granted that poetry would be considered as (fully) making sense. This is, I think, one important reason why Wellek and Warren were very careful to separate the intrinsic features of *literature* from the intrinsic features of *the study of* literature.

> We must first make a distinction between literature and literary study. The two are distinct activities: one is creative: an art; the other, if not precisely a science, is a species of knowledge or of learning. […] [T]he task of the student is […] [to] translate his experience of literature into intellectual terms, assimilate it into a coherent scheme which must be rational if it is to be knowledge. […] Some theorists […] draw rather different sceptical conclusions from our contrast between literature and its study: literature, they argue, cannot be 'studied' at all. We can only read, enjoy, appreciate it. For the rest, we can only accumulate all kinds of information 'about' literature. Such scepticism is actually more widespread than one might suppose.[354]

In considering the way in which, above, Wellek and Warren discuss issues surrounding the study literature, one can see – and see most explicitly – how New Criticism had to ward off what they conceived of as a skeptical threat in order to establish the validity of academic criticism. Indeed, this quote enables one to index the specific threats that the New Critics were up against and why it became so urgent to discover the nature of the literary object literature and to *define* literary criticism. As Tate suggested earlier: failure to know what literature *is* (its criteria) seemed to go hand in hand with the failure to know what criticism *is* (and its criteria). The New Critics wanted literary studies to be a field of learning in which one could claim to have solid *knowledge* of the literary work, of what it meant and what it was. This would of course demand rationality and systematicity on behalf of literary studies and literary interpretation. But what would become of the rationality of interpretation if it turned out that the object of study, literature itself, did not have a particular, or stable, meaning? What is then *there* for the interpreter to

[352] Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, pp. 17–19.
[353] Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature,* p. 19.
[354] Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, p. 15.

elicit? Must there not be some way in which the interpreter can claim to *know* what the work means? How could anyone claim to have knowledge of literature, if literature, when thoroughly scrutinized, does not express anything meaningful? These specific theoretical questions were at the heart of New Criticism; they express how deeply troubled the New Critics were by the threat of interpretive skepticism.

4.3. New Criticism and Philosophy of Language

The question of literary and poetic meaningfulness and whether literature could yield real knowledge were questions that encroached on New Criticism from two specific directions I want to highlight: on the one hand, from the side of logical positivism and on the other, from the side of modernist literature. In this and the following section I shall sketch how the threat of meaning skepticism was already present in both these contexts in a way that was hardly possible for New Criticism to ignore.

In *Science and Poetry* (1926), I. A. Richards asks: "What *kind of a thing*, in the widest sense, is poetry?"[355] Whether Richards himself should be considered a New Critic, or rather a most important forerunner can be debated – but his considerable influence on New Criticism is beyond question.[356] Richards is continuously referred to in New Critical works, and his influence is readily seen (even when directly contested). If there is a New Critic, (or important predecessor to the New Critics) who more than anyone else seems to have had science as an ideal model for criticism, it is I.A. Richards. As Carol Atherton notes: "Richards' work on interpretation […] aimed to secure […] objectivity by drawing on his belief that language could be analysed according to clear, scientific principles."[357]

In her study, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism* (1971), Ewa M. Thompson gives visibility to a fact about New Criticism and its theoretical heritage I find both important, and rather seldom stressed (if at all mentioned) in discussions about New Criticism. Thompson notes not only that both the development of Russian formalism and New Criticism took place against the background of an "intensified interest in the philosophy of language and literature displayed by a number of theorists toward the end of

[355] I.A. Richards, "The Poetic Experience", *Science and Poetry*, in Psyche Miniatures General Series No. 1, Published in connection with *Psyche*, A Quarterly Journal of General and Applied Psychology *(*London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. Ldt., 1926), p. 9.

[356] According to Krieger it is T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards that "exercise perhaps the greatest influence on the new critics. We might say that it is through the fusion of the theories of Richards and Eliot that much of what passes for the new criticism has taken form." Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry*, p. 57.

[357] Carol Atherton, *Defining Literary Criticism: Scholarship, Authority and the Possession of Literary Knowledge, 1880–2002* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 139.

the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century."[358] But she also singles out Kantian idealism and neo-positivism – or as the latter is also often called, logical positivism – as significant epistemological traditions which had an impact on both Russian formalism and New Criticism.[359] As Thompson writes, "the New Critics found in the writings of the neo-positivists a direct stimulus for the structural study of poetry and for terminological precision."[360]

It is the influence of logical positivism I here wish to focus on in order to make explicit how the problem of meaning skepticism is brought into the structure of New Critical theorization about poetry, via the theoretical importation of this particular strand of philosophy of language.[361] Though the following characterization will not do justice to the internal differences among the logical positivists I hope it will, despite its crudity, clarify how the skeptical problematic traced therein influenced the New Criticism and that this particular rendering of the problematic was introduced to New Critical theorizing from its very beginning.

The logical positivists, Neo-positivists, or Neo-empiricists, are all different labels of a philosophical movement which started in Vienna in the 1920s, formed around Professor Morris Schlick. Around him, a group of philosophers and logicians gathered who were inspired by Wittgenstein, Russell, Whitehead and Frege. The group, also called the Schlick group or the Vienna circle, set out to make philosophy more scientific, seeking to cleanse it from what was conceived as *metaphysical nonsense*, which to a vast extent were seen as conjuring up mere philosophical *pseudo-problems*. Opposing Kant's idea of the possibility of synthetic a priori truths, inspired by Frege's development of logical calculus as a means to logical clarification, and guided by their understanding of the earlier Wittgenstein, the logical positivists tried to bring about a clear demarcation between synthetic a posteriori truths on the one hand – expressed in true or false *statements* about empirical facts – and analytic a priori statements on the other. Starkly put, in what is also called the logical positivists' verificationist theory of meaning, the logical positivists took the relation between knowledge and meaning to be, more or less, the following. If a proposition were to be (cognitively) meaningful it had to meet the following criteria: either it had to be *an empirical statement* about some fact (such that it could then be true or false depending on how things are in the world), or it could be an *analytic statement* expressing logi-

[358] Ewa M. Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism: A Comparative Study* (The Hauge: Mouton and Co. N.V. Publishers, 1971), p. 35.
[359] Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism*, p. 55.
[360] Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism*, p. 88, note 67.
[361] It is important to see this inheritance since it is also true that, as for instance Gerald Graff points out, New Criticism fiercely opposed the ideas of logical positivism. I will return to how Brooks does so in more detail, in chapter 6. See Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp.140–142.

cally necessary truths (tautologies). As Alfred Ayer succinctly put it in his *Language, Truth, and Logic*: "[A] statement is held to be literally meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable."[362]

As Thompson notes, there is no question about the "tie between the Schlick group, the Formalists and Richards."[363] Among the logical positivists Richards had found a philosophical-scientific ramification for the analysis of *meaning* – a phenomenon he was deeply interested in.[364] For what discipline could the nature of meaning be of any greater relevance than for literary criticism? If literary criticism were to become more scientific, Richards found it crucial that one of its key concepts be thoroughly analyzed. After all, what is reading and interpreting if not attempts to work out and explicate meaning? In *Practical Criticism* (1929), Richards expresses great hopes of what criticism could achieve if it only started from a clear view of the nature of *meaning*:

> The *original* difficulty of all reading, the problem of *making out the meaning*, is our obvious starting-point. The answer to those apparently simple questions: 'What is meaning?' 'What are we doing when we endeavour to make it out?' *What* is it we are making out?' are the master-keys to all the problems of criticism. If we can make use of them the locked chambers and corridors of the theory of poetry open to us, and a new and impressive order, is discovered even in the most erratic twists of the protocols.[365]

Earlier traditions of criticism, which had not theorized the concept of meaning deeply enough, were not only charged with being intellectually naïve. Given the strict philosophical criteria of meaningfulness to which Richards was attracted, he found that "most critical dogmas of the past are either false

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[362] Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1949), p. 9.

[363] Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism,* p. 88. Thompson observes that there might seem to be a "chronological inconsistency" in claiming that the logical positivists had such an impact on Russian Formalism and New Criticism when the Vienna Circle was formed in the 1920s, which is in fact slightly after the first published works of Jakobson, Tynjanov and Richards. To me, such an objection is not very forceful. In the beginning of the 1920s there was hardly any real New Criticism happening either. Indeed, if we instead look at the works of the New Critics in the 1930s and 40s, such objections are no longer feasible. As Thompson later adds, the Vienna circle formed its philosophical ideas through an interest in, and development of, the ideas and writings of Wittgenstein, Russell, Whitehead, and Frege, all of which had prominent philosophical impact on contemporary philosophy. The members of the Vienna circle were known in international philosophical circles. Rudolf Carnap came into contact with C.K. Ogden and Charles Morris in England. Morris published in the first issue of the *Kenyon Review* and remained an often discussed and criticized figure among the New Critics. See Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism,* pp. 88–89.

[364] Together with C.K Ogden, I.A. Richards wrote *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of The Science of Symbolism* (1923).

[365] I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (1929) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1948), p. 180.

or nonsense."[366] However, it is not hard to imagine what sort of tensions would arise once a philosophical analysis of meaning, developed first and foremost with problems of philosophy of science in mind, was applied to the criticism of poetry. One of the members of the Vienna circle, Victor Kraft, gives such a tension the following expression:

> [T]he members of the Vienna Circle were doing philosophy in a scientific spirit. […] [I]n the spirit of clarity, thoroughness and solidity which is demanded by the scientific method, in contrast to the usual vagueness and instability of philosophical claims; that their approach had a scientific soberness about it instead of appealing to the heart and fulfilling secret wishes, was indeed inevitable. Imaginative conceptual poetry is surely more interesting for the average person, and the wisdom of a great personality surely has more significance for human life. Yet, they are subjective, matters of opinion, unverifiable. Lacking universal validity, they are matters of personal conviction, but do not represent knowledge.[367]

Can poetry express knowledge at all? To what extent is poetry meaningful if it is not verifiable (or analytically true)? These questions must have been more or less *forced* upon a theorist of criticism who was working within, or at least within something that bore important similarities with, a logical positivist framework. Richards tried to settle the conflict in part by (not unlike Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature*) distinguishing between the intellectual rigor one could demand of poetry from that expected of criticism. In "Poetry and Beliefs" he writes:

> It will be admitted – by those who distinguish between scientific statement, where truth is ultimately a matter of verification as this is understood in the laboratory, and emotive utterance, where 'truth' is primarily acceptability *by* some attitude, and more remotely is the acceptability *of* this attitude itself – that it is *not* the poet's business to make true statements. Yet poetry has constantly the air of making statements, and important ones; which is one reason why some mathematicians cannot read it. They find the alleged statements to be *false*. It will be agreed that their approach to poetry and their expectations from it are mistaken.[368]

According to Richards's emotive theory of poetry, criticism, like science, can aspire to truth and knowledge since criticism produces claims about how things really are: real *statements*. But poetry is not producing statements, but *pseudo-statements*, and the "acceptance which a pseudo-statement receives

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[366] I.A. Richards, "Poetry and Beliefs," p. 55.
[367] Victor Kraft, *The Vienna Circle: The Origin of Neo-Positivism: A Chapter in the History of Recent Philosophy*, transl. Arthur Pap (1953) (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1969), pp. 192–193. Also quoted in Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism*, p. 87.
[368] I.A. Richards, "Poetry and Beliefs," p. 56.

is entirely governed by its effects upon our feelings and attitudes."[369] Since there is, according to Richards, "no prospect of our gaining adequate knowledge" through them one should simply "cut our pseudo-statements free from belief" entirely.[370] In this way poetry cannot really be charged with falsity either since, strictly speaking, it cannot make any epistemic claims at all.[371]

It is important to make this point in order to see why someone like Brooks is so occupied with the role of *statements* in poetry – something which, without accounting for this contextual background, might just seem like a strange and uncalled for limitation of linguistic categories. Statements, or the propositions of statements, were in this idiom the meaning-carrying entity in language. How could this conception of meaning be reconciled with the idea that poetry does not produce statements? Would this not leave poetry just as empty of meaning as the "vague" and "instable" metaphysical claims the logical positivists were charging with nonsensicality? Can it really be the case then that Richards's effort to provide criticism with a thorough analysis of the concept of meaning would leave criticism with a conception of meaning that threatened to exclude poetry as nonsense?

Richards tried to argue that even though poetry was composed of pseudo-statements, this was not really a problem for either poetry or the study of poetry. It would only be a problem if we believe, like "some mathematicians," that poetry is in the business of really trying to make statements, of saying something true about the world; certainly, this may be easy to believe since poetry has the "air of making statements." Even if many New Critics, including Brooks, opposed this view, Richards's theorization on poetry invoked a skeptical threat against the meaningfulness of poetry, and this skeptical problematic was already at work in New Critical theory from the very beginning.[372]

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[369] I.A. Richards, "Poetry and Beliefs," p. 58.
[370] I.A. Richards, "Poetry and Beliefs," pp. 60–61.
[371] However, as Richard Foster points out, Richards's thinking developed over time, even in the direction of "romanticism" and "Richards was never a very good positivist – never a very *pure* one." Richard Foster, *The New Romantics: A Reappraisal of the New Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 47. I am here referring to "the early" Richards. See also Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry*, p. 182, note 2, p. 219.
[372] Joshua Gang makes a related or parallel point while writing on the *behaviorist* legacy of Richards in New Criticism. Gang writes: "Despite their overt rejections of Richards's methods, these New Critics largely perpetuated Richards's methodology and behaviorist assumptions about the nature of literary experience. […] Embedded in the formalist rhetoric of Brooks's 'heresy of paraphrase' and Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'intentional fallacy' are mediated reassertions of […] behaviorist intervention." Joshua Gang, "Behaviorism and the Beginnings of Close Reading," *English Literary History*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Spring 2011), p. 3. In a similar way as Gang argues that traces of behaviorism linger in both Beardsley and Brooks, I will argue that traces of logical positivist conceptions of meaning haunts, causing skeptical problems for, Beardsley and Brooks.

4.4. New Criticism and Literary Modernism. Modernist Struggle with Meaning and Knowledge – The Examples of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein

The close connection between modernism and New Criticism is well documented.[373] The New Critics themselves conceived of this connection as a significant one, such as when Tate writes: "If the New Criticism differs radically from the best Old Criticism, it differs at its own peril; nothing wholly new would seem to be critically possible at a late stage of culture, such as we find ourselves in. The new thing may be the New Literature (how new it is I do not know), and a criticism sprang up to show us how to read it."[374] It is hardly surprising that questions about literature's and poetry's meaningfulness became, with the advent of modernism, increasingly pressing – in fact it seems more or less inevitable. Literary modernism questioned and explored its own meaningfulness, not only thematically but by becoming, in new significant ways, *harder* to understand, sometimes even revolting against the meaningful, denying it as a goal. As Hickman writes in *Rereading the New Criticism*:

> The rise of New Criticism was also importantly bound up in, and facilitated by, the ascent of literary modernism, emergent at the same time […]. Modernist literature featured complex texts for which New Critical methods of close reading were particularly apt, often even developed to address. In a climate of what would be widely referred to as modernist literary "difficulty," readers sought expert guides to help them navigate the modernist labyrinth. It was the work of poetic-critic modernists such as Eliot and Pound that first inspired many of the New Critics.[375]

If literature, in this way, began to question and explore its own conditions of intelligibility, it is only natural that the New Critics in turn began to ask some fundamental questions about the nature of criticism. When literature

[373] In volume 7 of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, entitled *Modernism and the New Criticism*, Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey warns us not to link the two together too easily or too tightly. They write: "Although it is a commonplace to assimilate modernism and the New Criticism to one another, sometimes treating the latter as if it were merely a more systematic, more philosophical, or more academic articulation of formalist undercurrents within modernism, much is lost in assigning to either term the kind of monolithic coherence such a claim presumes." Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey, "Introduction," *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume 7: Modernism and the New Criticism*, eds. A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey (2000) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 3.

[374] Tate, "A Note on Critical 'Autotelism'," p. 169.

[375] Hickman, "Introduction, Rereading the New Criticism," p. 14. Whether modernist literature should be seen as requiring *expert* guides, as Hickman writes, or to what extent (and in what sense) New Critics should be seen as "experts" when their close readings proved "particularly apt" for reading modernist poetry, are questions I will address in chapter 6 when I analyze the interpretive *authority* of close reading.

becomes in this way self-reflective, that is, when it tries to formulate its own self-knowledge, it seems only natural that this should prompt criticism to in turn become occupied with *its* own conditions of possibility. That is, both art and criticism enter a stage in which they ask Kantian questions about criteria.

The struggle with meaning and knowledge is of course manifoldly expressed throughout modernist literature. In the following I will not try to recapitulate the multiple ways in which literary modernism explored the limits of both – that would not only be an impossible task, but, for my present purposes, it would also be unnecessary. Instead I will here briefly focus on two iconic modernist authors, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), a novelist and a poet respectively, in order to exemplify how at the heart of modernist literature we find Kantian questions about meaning, about the problem of knowing meaning and, moreover, with how meaning is communicable.

What I want to suggest is that both Woolf and Stein, as modernist authors, are struggling with a particular predicament I shall investigate in greater depth in chapter 6, with respect to Cavell's concept of "fraudulence" – and what I will call "a truth of aesthetic skepticism." Without wishing to run ahead of myself, this predicament, acutely felt in modernism, is one in which literary criteria are no longer reliable and we can no longer be sure of what literature and poetry *are*. Woolf and Stein respond to this cultural crisis within the context of their own literary creativity. This means that they also respond to a truth in skepticism which modernism itself is a part of and a witness to: that literary criteria indeed *can* break down and need to be reinvented. Through their artistic investigations into and negotiations of literary criteria, both authors try to (re)gain a new intimate and passionate knowledge of the world in words, a knowledge truer to present, modern, realities. Their modernist works are thus not merely modernist works of "unknowing": works describing or reflecting a cracked world, a shattered subject, and a gap between object and its name.[376] Instead their works contain efforts to close

[376] I borrow this term "unknowing" from Philip Weinstein's *Unknowing: The Works of Modernist Fiction* (2005). Focusing on Kafka, Proust, and Faulkner, Weinstein traces what he calls the modernist fiction of *unknowing*: works in which the conditions of the common sense world we find in realism, or more widely, are disrupted. In a world where the nature of such fundamental categories as time and space breaks down, the subject's capacity to know is undermined. While subjectivity in these works is essentially rooted in context and continuity, the failure to know the world becomes the failure to gain true self-knowledge. Thus we find in the characters of Kafka that the unruly fusion of contexts and places (as when parts of a trial suddenly can take place in private chambers) and the transformations of bodies (as when Gregor Samsa wakes up as a bug) result in subjects having their selfhood crushed. Their inner self-understanding cannot remain intact when their outer, and bodily, situation is transformed. Unable to act knowingly in the world they are in the end unable to recognize themselves as coherent selves. See Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005). To my mind, though, such instances of *unknowing* may also capture the very condition of crisis which so many modernist works are trying to

such gaps through passionate literary interventions where language ties new bonds between bodied subjects and the world and its things.

In the context of discussing modernism, Virginia Woolf's famous words: "[O]n or about December 1910 human character changed," are often cited.[377] The quote is from Woolf's essay "Character in Fiction" (1924). Just a few paragraphs further down on the same page, Woolf continues: "All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature."[378] Wolf thinks that transformative changes, as felt and experienced in the modern world, cannot be ignored by contemporary authors, and in "Character in Fiction," she discusses how these changes should be dealt with in the contemporary literature of her time. For Woolf the difficulty of her own contemporaneity issues in a break between what she conceives as the old generation of authors, the Edwardians, and the new, among which she counts herself, the Georgians.[379] For the Georgians, the old convention of writing had, according to Woolf, "cease[d] to be means of communication between writer and reader, and becomes instead an obstacle and an impediment."[380] The tools of the Edwardians, she writes, "are not our tools, and that business are not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death."[381] So how should a writer then go on writing if the tools are dead, or killing the literature?

In "Character in Fiction" the death of the old conventions does not immediately mean joyful, creative, liberty for the Georgian authors. The tone of the essay is not one of exhilarating freedom. Rather, to be now able to say *anything at all* appears nigh on impossible. If there remains a tone to register in this new insight, it is rather one of shock. The failure of old conventions brings out for Woolf just "how serious a matter it is when the tools of one generation are useless for the next."[382] What threatens the new literary generation, bereft of communicative conventions, is therefore artistic *muteness*.

Here I think one can see the presence of a Kantian problematic about meaning operating within modernist literature itself: Woolf is struggling

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overcome – where the condition of unknowing is not the end but the starting point of the work. The literary disruption of time and space, and the challenging of a traditionally realistically rendered subjectivity may also function as tools to revitalize our knowledge and self-knowledge: transforming and transposing it to new situations. I think Woolf and Stein are good examples of such successful attempts that begin in instances of doubt and bewilderment, but that reinvent meaning and knowledge in literature.

[377] Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction," (1924) *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. with an introduction and notes by David Bradshaw, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 38.

[378] Woolf, "Character in Fiction," p. 38.

[379] Woolf, "Character in Fiction," p. 38.

[380] Woolf, "Character in Fiction," p. 51.

[381] Woolf, "Character in Fiction," p. 48.

[382] Woolf, "Character in Fiction," p. 48.

with the very possibility and conditions of *meaning* in literature. However, the threat of muteness Woolf faces is not the result of a philosophical *denial* of common (grammatical) criteria of literature due to a philosophical fantasy or confusion. Rather, in the artistic case of Woolf, the old literary criteria, the old conventions of literature, were no longer up to speed with modern experiences and sensibilities. This is to say Woolf rejects certain literary criteria, or at least some of them, but not because she has some theory of what literature or literary meaning is. Rather, she discards them because she can no longer mean what she wants with them: they have ceased to facilitate their purpose.

Very vividly Woolf then proceeds to describe how, ensnared within this predicament, she struggles to "find a common ground" with the reader and hopes to construct a new "convention which would not seem […] too odd, unreal, and far-fetched to believe in" and not reproduce the "dreary, irrelevant, and humbugging" style of Edwardian writing.[383] Telling us this, she also confesses how *tempting* it would be to simply write in the old style: that would be doing something she *knew* how to do. Yet, "if I had done that," she professes "I should have escaped the appalling effort of saying what I meant."[384] This is significant for the following reasons: unlike the skeptic, Woolf refuses to escape from her responsibility as a speaker and artist – she refuses to escape from the "appalling effort" of trying to say what she means. Furthermore, she does so in a cultural moment when the very criteria of *what it would mean* to succeed (in saying what she means, in creating a new style, in establishing a "common ground" with the reader, etc.) are unclear. Still she ventures to do it. Woolf's strategy is the opposite of the skeptic's: in the face of uncertainty she trusts her own and literature's ability to reinvent literary criteria as the old criteria wither.

Similarly, in her famous lecture "Poetry and Grammar" (1935), Gertrude describes how the traditional poetics of nineteenth century English poetry no longer seems feasible to her: in that poetics a thing and its name were so naturally linked, and the poet's accuracy in capturing and rendering the world with his or her words was something natural and alive. Now, however, word and object have begun to drift apart – precisely because the poet began to *know too well* how the world was (and had been) worded. The old accuracy had with time turned into something stale, false, or irrelevant: like clichés. She writes:

> So then poetry up to the present time has been a poetry of nouns a poetry of naming something of really naming that thing passionately completely passionately naming that thing by its name.

[383] Woolf, "Character in Fiction," p. 49.
[384] Woolf, "Character in Fiction," p. 49.

> Slowly and particularly during the nineteenth century the English nineteenth century everybody had come to know too well very much too well the name anything had when you called it by its name.
>
> That is something that inevitably happened. And what else could they do. They had to go on doing what they did, that is calling anything by its name passionately but if as I say they really knew its name too well could they call it its name simply in that way. Slowly they could not.[385]

Stein's unconventional punctuation does not hinder us from hearing the question and the answer in the last two sentences of the quote.[386] If the poets really did know the objects' names *too well*, could they then go on naming them, as if infinitely, with unceasing ease and naturalness? According to Stein, they could not. Slowly, she tells us, the poets could no longer bring those names passionately into life. Poetry, which knew too well what a thing (traditionally) was called, has ceased to function. The words became fossilized, no more than *mere words*: the poetic language was, to speak with Wittgenstein, *idling*.[387] To grasp the things of the world again with passionate meaning was therefore the task of the poet:

> And so in Tender Buttons and then on and on I struggled with the ridding myself of nouns, I knew nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose if anything that is everything was to go on meaning something.
>
> And so I went on with this exceeding struggle of knowing really knowing what a thing was really knowing it knowing anything I was seeing anything I was feeling so that its name could be something, by its name coming to be a thing in itself as it was but would not be anything just and only as a name.
>
> I wonder if you do see what I mean.
>
> What I mean by what I have just said is this. I had to feel anything and everything that for me was existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name. The name of a thing might be something in itself if it could come to be real enough but just as a name it was not enough something. At any rate that is the way I felt and still do feel about it.[388]

In this passage one sees several important issues coming to the fore. First, Stein's battle with the role of nouns in her poetics.[389] The battle here is in-

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[385] Gertrude Stein, "Poetry in Grammar," *Lectures in America* (1935) (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 240–241.

[386] In "Poetry and Grammar" Stein explains how uninteresting and ugly she finds the question mark in writing: "The question mark is alright when it is all alone when it is used as a brand on cattle or when it could be used as decoration but connected with writing it is completely and entirely completely uninteresting. It is evident that if you ask a question you ask a question but anybody who can read at all knows when a question is a question as it is written in writing." Stein, "Poetry in Grammar," pp. 214–215.

[387] Wittgenstein, "The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work," *Philosophical Investigations*, §132, p. 44e.

[388] Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," pp. 242–243.

[389] Or as she depicts poetry's relationship with nouns, in phrases that rather make it look like a relation of complicated, almost erotic desire: "Poetry is concerned with using with abusing,

deed intricate because while Stein writes that she *knew* that "nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose," and while she indeed found nouns to be the least interesting and relevant class of words in prose, she still considers nouns to be the essential category of words in poetry: "Nouns are the names of things and so nouns are the basis of poetry."[390] How should one understand the idea that nouns both are "the basis of poetry," and yet "nouns must go in poetry"? This paradoxical situation in which poetry must rid itself of its own essence reads to me as a diagnosis of a crisis where poetry has *already* ceased to be itself. Therefore poetry must be fundamentally reinvented. Since the grammar of poetry had started to crumble and the old ways of relying on the noun had led to a dead end, the aesthetic attitude towards the noun had to be transformed in order for poetry to become poetry once more. Thus Stein writes: "I struggled I struggled desperately with the recreation and the avoidance of nouns and yet poetry being poetry nouns are nouns."[391] If poetry was to live again, a new life-endowing relationship with the noun had to be established. The end of this wrestling with nouns, of her "using losing refusing pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns"[392] was to achieve *meaning* once more: so that "anything that was everything was to go on meaning something."[393]

Secondly, this effort to *be able to mean* once more is, I think, evidently intimately connected with the capacity to *know*. That is, the poetic capacity to mean is for Stein deeply connected with knowing what something *is*. Thus, her poetic ambition profoundly concerns questions of "being *so*." Stein's struggle to "go on meaning something" is simultaneously an "exceeding struggle of really knowing what a thing was."

In *Tender Buttons* (1914) one can consequently see almost an obsession with knowing things, knowing *objects*, and particularly the most basic and ordinary of objects.[394] *Tender Buttons* is divided into three parts: "OBJECTS," "FOOD," and "ROOMS." The first part reorganizes and explores "A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS," "A BOX," "A PLATE," "A RED HAT," "A BLUE COAT," "A TABLE," etc. In "FOOD" we find a sensuous exploration of "CRANBERRIES," "MILK," "CUSTARD,"

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with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. […] Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns." Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," p. 231.

[390] Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," p. 234.

[391] Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," p. 238.

[392] Stein, "Poetry and Grammar", p. 231.

[393] Stein, "Poetry and Grammar", p. 242.

[394] For an excellent exploration of the function and theme of the ordinary and everyday in Stein and Woolf, see Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For an interesting and rich reading of Stein's poetry in relation to Wittgenstein, the ordinary, grammatical structure, and the boundary between sense and nonsense, see chapter 3 "'Grammar in Use': Wittgenstein/ Gertrude Stein/ Marinetti," in Marjorie Perloff's, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and The Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 83–112.

"ROAST POTATOES," and so on.[395] It is as if Stein thinks that these ordinary things have been glazed over by the dull conformity of everyday life, such that their central place in our existence has become obscure. So that these objects might be recovered, Stein calls them back into reality by first naming them with capital letters, and then by giving them a reorganized poetic place in the world, both familiar and estranged. Or as Liesl Olson writes in *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009): "This attention to objects changes the very nature of their ordinariness. The objects attain a kind of vivid immanence, while nonetheless resisting any obvious epiphany or clear statement of 'meaning.'"[396] The very first poem in *Tender Buttons*, may serve as an example:

> A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.
>
> A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.[397]

This brings to mind not only Wittgenstein's words in *Philosophical Investigations* §129, that "[t]he aspect of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity ([o]ne is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes)," but also the words of Victor Shklovsky: "Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. […] And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*."[398] What takes place in Stein, and to some extent in Woolf too, is the frequent occurrence of defamiliarization. The Russian formalists called it *ostranenie*: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar'"[399] so we can see them afresh. It is to bring back to life and attention the ordinary things of the world to which habit and everyday usage has made us blind. Ezra Pound caught the ambition in his phrase "Make it New!"[400] Exploring these *things* in her poetry, wording them passionately anew, Stein at the same time explores

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[395] Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (1914) (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1970), p. 9, p. 11, p. 15, p. 17, p. 26, p. 46, p. 47, p. 51.
[396] Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, p. 98.
[397] Stein, *Tender Buttons*, p. 9.
[398] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §129, p. 43e. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," (1917), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, transl. and with an introduction by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12. Liesl Olson quotes the same passages from Wittgenstein and Shklovsky, as she characterizes modernist literature's interest in the ordinary. See Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, pp. 4–5.
[399] Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," p. 12.
[400] See Ezra Pound, *Make it New: Essays by Ezra Pound* (New Haven Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1935).

what poetry *is*. This exploration is to my mind a renegotiation of the grammatical criteria of poetry. In writing this poetry, in a time where the existence and identity of poetry seemed dubious, she learns intimately, and passionately, while instructing her readers as well, what poetry is and can be.

Thirdly, the difficulty in achieving this new meaning and the great risk of failing is acknowledged in Stein's question: "I wonder if you do see what I mean." This is indeed not an irrelevant question. Since Stein explores what poetry *is* by daring to *change* what poetry is – a change motivated by the wish to make poetry once more itself – there is of course a great risk that we will *not* recognize what she does *as being poetry* at all. There will be a risk that she tries to change the grammatical criteria of poetry so much that her leaps and her projections go too far. Or to speak with Woolf, there is the risk that Stein fails to find a "common ground" with the readers, and that her poems (or "poems") will seem too "odd, unreal, and far-fetched" to be understood.[401]

The point of this poetic transformation is simultaneously to reinstall life and reality in both poetry and the objects of poetry. The Cartesian way of formulating this ambition would be to say that this is an effort to make all these things *real* to the reader and the poet again, to present them as truly *existing*, which implies that they have somehow become unreal to us, just as it implies that poetry somehow had become unreal or nonexistent. This way of formulating Stein's poetic task seems to come natural to Stein herself who writes that she "had to feel anything and everything that for me was existing so intensely that I could put it down in writing as a thing in itself without at all necessarily using its name." If poetry in this way had to bring the objects of the world back into our lives, and make the world real, knowable and present once more, this task testifies to modernism's own struggle with a kind of truth in skepticism: that the world or one's culture can become, or are at least feel as if it is, distant, estranged, dead and barren – like the moon.[402]

It is interesting to compare Stein's poetry with Moore's philosophical common sense statements in this context. Because while Moore's statements may, on the surface, look like they are making perfect sense ("Here is a hand"), Stein's poems may, *prima facie*, appear just as obviously *not* to make sense. And while both are, in different ways, attempting to return the objects of the world to us, Moore's route of trying to *prove* the existence of

[401] This risk inherent in modernism will be investigated in chapter 6, when I introduce Cavell's discussion of the problem of *fraudulence* in my analysis of Brooks's response to poetic skepticism.

[402] The task of making art and the world and our relation to both more *real* will be discussed in chapter 7, in light of Susan Sontag's idea that interpretation rather hinders than helps us in the effort to bring life back into our relation to art. It will also be discussed in chapter 5, through Beardsley's, as I argue, *failed* attempts to make art real and present through theory.

the objects more or less constitutes the counterpoint to Stein's way of recalling them with passion (in capital letters) through *acknowledgment*.[403]

Stein's estranged re-ordering of these common, everyday things should be viewed, I think, as a poetic acknowledgment and contemplation of us as sensuous beings: inhabiting our rooms, savoring our tastes, having appetites and desires. In this acknowledgment that our existence is conjoined in a passionate, bodily relation with the world and its things – wording that relation anew – the gap between world and word can begin to close. We are once more inscribed into that very passionate relationship with the world: *feeling* it afresh. It is as if we had to be *reminded* of our bodily capacities to grasp, taste, dress, etc., through poetry's act of defamiliarization. Stein manages to achieve this (if we acknowledge, of course, that she does succeed) precisely because, while articulating the crisis of poetry on the Cartesian level of the real and unreal (she wants to share with us, and make us feel "everything that for me was existing so intensely" in poetry), she operates at the same time through her convention-challenging poetry, on the Kantian level of criteria.

It is through her grammatical work on poetry, that is, in her effort to revise the criteria of poetry, so it can do what it should do, that Stein can succeed (or fail) to make poetry (and the objects of poetry) *real* for us once more. The sense in which poems become "real" is the sense in which they become themselves again, that they begin once more to *mean* something to us. Stein's poetry asks what it means for poetry to be poetry, what is its "being *so*"? The question of Stein's success or failure to revitalize the criteria of poetry can thus be stated this way: is *Tender Buttons* poetry? Well, is it? Who has the authority to say? A poet? A critic? Someone reasonably well versed in poetry? Anybody who knows the language? It will be the task of chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this book to try to understand and answer these kinds of questions.

[403] The contrast between the effort to *prove* vs. *acknowledge* meaning, in the context of modernist poetry, will be discussed in chapter 6, through an analysis of Brooks's debate with Max Eastman.

Chapter 5: Monroe C. Beardsley and Interpretive Skepticism

> What kind of meaning does literature have?[404]
>
> We feel as if we had to *penetrate* the phenomena: our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the *'possibilities'* of phenomena.[405]
>
> Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is.[406]
>
> People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to entertain them. *That the latter have something to teach them;* that never occurs to them.[407]
>
> Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look![408]

Had he written nothing else Monroe C. Beardsley would still have earned his position as a seminal theorist on literary interpretation by being the author, or co-author, of one of the most well-known pieces on literary interpretation: "The Intentional Fallacy" from 1946. "The Intentional Fallacy" was closely followed by its twin essay, "The Affective Fallacy," in 1949. Beardsley wrote both together with W.K. Wimsatt and they were published in Wimsatt's New Critical classic, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poet-*

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[404] W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (1954) (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), p. xii.
[405] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §90, p. 36e.
[406] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §124, p. 42e.
[407] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains / Vermischte Bemerkungen: Eine Auswahl aus dem Nachlaß* (1980/1977), ed. Georg Henrik von Wright in Collaboration with Heikki Nyman, rev. ed. by Alois Pichler, transl. Peter Winch (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 42e.
[408] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* §66, p. 27e.

ry (1954). It is hard to overstate the significance and impact these two articles had on the theorizing of literary interpretation. "The Intentional Fallacy" initiated an enormous, notorious, and intricately diversified theoretical debate about the adequate role of "intention" in literature and in the understanding of literature. As David Newton-De Molina writes in the anthology *On Intention* (1976), devoted to this very debate: "modern discussion of intention in a literary context begins with Wimsatt and Beardsley's article."[409] Timothy Chambers furthermore notes that "William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's watershed work 'The Intentional Fallacy,' famously divided philosophers and critics into a pair of rival camps: intentionalists and anti-intentionalists."[410] Wimsatt and Beardsley, and the arguments they came to represent in both "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy," have remained central points of reference in discussions about literary interpretation. Their views have been formative in these discussions, not only on the concept of intention, but also in debates surrounding related interpretive subjects, such as singularism vs. pluralism, bivalence, relativism and realism, etc. It is precisely on the basis of the considerable influence that Beardsley's work has exerted over the field of literary studies – even when this work has been directly challenged and rejected – that here, both time and space will be dedicated to his specific contribution. Beardsley's theorizing may not be the most influential or fashionable in contemporary literary scholarship, in the sense of having advocates and supporters among contemporary critics, but due to his formative role in the field I believe this specific enquiry will also shed light on interpretive skepticism as a problem of *contemporary* theory.

Be this at it may, today we seem to have a situation where the idea of "the intentional fallacy" on the one hand is a staple furnishing in literary interpretive circles – even scholars engaged in biographical and intentionalist criticism are expected to qualify and accompany such approaches with some discussion of intentionality and subjectivity. On the other hand, even when the "intentional fallacy" thesis is directly criticized (as has been the case for a long time now) it has all the while forcefully affected the positions of those opposing it. Take the case of Stanley Fish who, in his *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), admits that: "the position I proceeded to take was dictated by the position […] best represented, perhaps, by William Wimsatt and Monroe

[409] David Newton-De Molina, "Introduction," *On Literary Intention: Critical Essays Selected and Introduced by David Newton-De Molina (*Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 1976), p. ix. For more on this debate, see also *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger, in the series The Arts and Their Philosophies, ed. Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), and Paisley Livingston, "Intention in Art," *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford and New York, 2003), pp. 275–290.

[410] Timothy Chambers, "Literary Intentionalism and the Identity Thesis: A Filé in the Ointment?," *Diálogos*, Vol. 40, No. 86 (2005), p. 157.

Beardsley's essays on the affective and intentional fallacies."[411] Fish goes on to say that initially he

> felt obliged to posit an object in relation to which readers' activities could be declared uniform, and that object was the text (at least insofar as it was a temporal structure of ordered items); but this meant that the integrity of the text was as basic to my position as it was to the position of the New Critics. And, indeed, from the very first I was much more dependent on new critical principles than I was willing to admit.[412]

Since it is the general spirit and form of Beardsley's theorizing – and not especially his anti-intentionalism (at least not on a more general level) – which makes him a skeptical twin regarding interpretation, he remains, irrespective of his unpopularity, still of interest to me as an example of interpretive skepticism. If his particular theoretical *position* regarding interpretation (that is, his anti-intentionalism) is challenged and yet some of his more fundamental theoretical presuppositions as to what a theory of interpretation is supposed to do remain, it is likely that adversarial *counter-positions*, such as Fish's, unwittingly stay within a skeptical *form* of formulating the problem about interpretation – with respect to its nature as well as its criteria of validity. In later works Beardsley modifies and qualifies his anti-intentionalism – ironically, one may think, by drawing upon speech act theory, since this is the preferred theoretical framework for intentionalists. However, because his overall theoretical trajectory remains by and large the same, I will claim that an investigation of these two early articles can be taken to express views that are continuous with his later work as well.[413]

This chapter has three parts, concluding with a summary. The first two parts are devoted to the two forms of interpretive skepticism I claim one can find in Beardsley. The first part traces the theme of skepticism in Beardsley's theoretical enterprise at a general level. Here I argue that Beardsley's foundationalist interpretive theory makes him a skeptical twin regarding interpretation. His anti-intentionalism plays a crucial part in this but is not investigated as such.

The second part concerns Beardsley's anti-intentionalism specifically; I shall demonstrate how his anti-intentionalism constitutes a specific literary version of other-minds skepticism. I also claim that this way of spelling out the kind of skepticism involved in Beardsley's apparent anti-skeptical theo-

[411] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 2.
[412] Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, p. 7.
[413] This is, I take it, quite uncontroversial. P.D. Juhl does the same in his *Interpretation*. Critiquing the "anti-intentionalist thesis," Juhl writes that "[p]erhaps the most forceful defense of this thesis is William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's article 'The Intentional Fallacy.' In subsequent publications both Wimsatt and Beardsley have clarified and elaborated their position." Juhl, *Interpretation*, pp. 45–46. Juhl then goes on to refer to Beardsley's *Aesthetics* and *The Possibility of Critcism*. Juhl, *Interpretation*, p. 46, footnote 3.

ry, is in line with Cavell's own critique of Beardsley. In both parts Cavell will figure as an alternative to Beardsley, exemplifying how we can theorize about interpretation in a non-skeptical way.

In the third part of this chapter I discuss Cavell's view on interpretive conflicts and the relation between interpretation and overinterpretation. The point of this discussion will be to show how such worries, which initially tend to fuel the skeptical reasoning of the Cartesian variety, can be given more fruitful treatments than those offered by an interpretive epistemologist like Beardsley. I will argue that Beardsley, as an interpretive realist, begins by operating within a Cartesian interpretive problematic. What predominantly motivates his theorizing is the problem of how to separate out valid interpretations from invalid ones, that is, how to distinguish interpretation from overinterpretation and misinterpretation. However, as he follows his Cartesian skeptical reasoning to its logical conclusion, he is pushed into a Kantian skeptical problematic about interpretation and criteria. In Cavell we find, I claim, alternative ways to analyze interpretive validity and interpretive conflicts which stay clear of any skeptical framing. It is thus my hope that, by the end of this chapter, I would have established in what ways Cavell can help us dissolve some of the problems that invited the Cartesian variety of interpretive skepticism in the first place.

5.1. Beardsley as a Skeptical Twin about Interpretation: The Cartesian and Kantian problematic.

I will assume that most literary scholars are familiar with the following words from "The Intentional Fallacy": "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art."[414] Though Beardsley and Wimsatt are here voicing a multiple critique of the role of intention in criticism – for instance that the intention of the author is not the correct criterion by which we should evaluate the *aesthetic accomplishment* of a literary work – it is the idea of authorial intention as constituting the criterion of the work's *true meaning* that has been the main focus of debate. According to Beardsley and Wimsatt not only is it the case that authorial intention is irrelevant to the meaning of a literary work – that is, irrelevant if we look for it *outside* of the poem (note that any intention successfully executed and expressed *in* the poem will be accessible *there*, and everything that is *there* in the poem is of course relevant) – but furthermore authorial intention is considered to be downright harmful and misleading; when criticism begins to consult such "external" evidence as either biographical or personal material (letters, diaries, interviews, etc.)

[414] W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1949), in W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 3.

whatever meaning is found in such material is precisely located *there* but not *in* the poem. This means that intentionalist interpretive strategies, according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, are bound to distort the meaning of the poem. Such readings will invariably lead to *mis*interpretations. Wimsatt and Beardsley explicitly link such procedures to *skepticism*.

> The Intentional Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its origins, a special case of what is known to philosophers as the Genetic Fallacy. It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological *causes* of the poem and ends in biography and relativism. The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*), a special case of epistemological skepticism, though usually advanced as if it had far stronger claims than the overall forms of skepticism. It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear.[415]

That Beardsley and Wimsatt obviously connect "impressionism" and "relativism" to a conceived skeptical threat can make one wonder why their relation to interpretive skepticism has not received more attention in the past. Talbot Taylor, however, has made important observations about it. In his *Mutual Misunderstanding* Taylor uses Beardsley's and Wimsatt's essays to exemplify how interpretive realists motivate their language theories by posing a skeptical threat. Commentating on the above quote Taylor writes:

> The evocation of "The Relativist Threat" as a rhetorical device is well exemplified in a classic of the school of interpretive theory known as New Criticism: Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon*. The authors argue that only one realist theory of interpretation can avoid sliding down the slippery slope to sceptical relativism. This is 'formalist' theory, which takes the meaning of a text to be the property of the text itself.[416]

Wimsatt and Beardsley are interesting for Taylor since they provide him with a succinct example of how a certain rhetorical strategy of the "skeptical strawman" often gets deployed in order to motivate the need for the construction of a theory of language. But for me this appeal to a skeptical threat reveals something more fundamentally problematical about Beardsley's overall theorizing. In the above passage, Beardsley describes the skeptical consequences of "impressionism" and "relativism" as cases in which the poem itself ultimately *disappears*. How should one understand that particular worry? I shall return to this peculiar way of formulating the problem in

[415] W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy" (1949), in W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, p. 21. Also quoted in Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, pp. 160–161.
[416] Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding*, p. 160.

the next section. But first, let me be a little more clear about Beardsley's general theoretical stance toward interpretation.

First, Beardsley is an interpretive *realist*. According to Beardsley literary interpretations reveal real properties of the work, the properties of which are present *in* the text before the interpreter sets to work. Second, Beardsley is a defender of *bivalence* in interpretation: "Certainly interpretations are 'right' or 'wrong,' and there are *mis*interpretations. Moreover, the statements that are given as interpretations ('This poem has such-and-such a meaning') can be called true or false."[417] He is also an interpretive *singularist*: for each literary text, there is only one single right interpretation:

> [P]lausibility is at least an appearance of truth based upon some relevant evidence, and any statement that is plausible must be *in principle* capable of being shown true or false. […] I hold that there are a great many interpretations that obey what might be called the principle of "the Intolerability of Incompatibles," i.e., if two of them are logically incompatible, they cannot both be true. Indeed, I hold that *all* of the literary interpretations that deserve the name obey this principle. But of course I do not wish to deny that there are cases of ambiguity where *no* interpretation can be established over its rivals; nor do I wish to deny that there are cases where we cannot be sure that we have the correct interpretation.[418]

Based on this characterization it seems quite clear that Beardsley, like Hirsch, is an heir to hermeneutical theory. According to both theorists, the main task that both they, in particular, and theories of interpretation, more generally speaking, are facing, is how *principally* to separate the correct or true interpretations from the false ones – i.e. how to *avoid misunderstanding*. This means for Beardsley that, since he is a singularist, every time we encounter opposing interpretations that cannot be formed into one – such that the interpretations are "logically incompatible" – we know that at least one of them is false. Of course neither of the interpretations needs to be true, and if one of them is we may still not be able to tell which one.

As long as there is disagreement about what a work means this constitutes a *problem* for Beardsley. And as Beardsley notes himself, there is often disagreement in criticism. In the following quote I think one can see how this way of thinking leads Beardsley into interpretive skepticism:

> [T]here is often disagreement about what a work of art *means*: about the way in which it is to be understood or interpreted. Consider, for example, a surrealist painting, in which a strange humanoid figure stands on one leg that seems to be growing out of the ground; he is alone and on an endless desert whose stretching sands somehow become in the distance the walls of a prison; his head is a spinning top, and his navel is a sinister bloodshot eye. What

[417] Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University press, 1970), p. 41.
[418] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, pp. 43–44.

> does it signify? In a case like this it will not be difficult to collect wildly varying interpretations. Is it an allegorical view of the predicament of Modern Man? Or is it merely a bizarre juxtaposition of incongruous entities, designed to produce a sense of deep uneasiness? […] When questions like these come up, and opinions differ, the aesthetician will again encounter some very basic and difficult questions. How do we know (can we really "know") what a painting "says"[…]? To produce well-reasoned answers to these questions, the aesthetician will have to probe deeply into the nature of symbolism, of metaphor – even of truth and of the meaning of "meaning" itself.[419]

The above quote exemplifies, I think, a clear case of a Cartesian skeptical problematic that starts off with an interpretive "hard case." Beardsley begins by describing a scenario where we encounter interpretive disagreement about a particularly challenging surrealist painting that affords many possible interpretations. Among them Beardsley offers the following opposing alternative: should we understand the painting as expressing "an allegorical view of the predicament of Modern Man" or "merely a bizarre juxtaposition of incongruous entities, designed to produce a sense of deep uneasiness"? In presenting these two possibilities Beardsley remains on, what I have called, the rough ground of interpretation. Faced with this kind of modernist art, whether paintings or literary works, we may find it difficult to make up our minds about which interpretation (one or many) we take to be both striking and valid.

But amidst this predicament of interpretive conflict or uncertainty – a predicament I regard as still practical – Beardsley makes a second move. He suggests we are forced to back away from the work that puzzles us so as to *begin* by asking "some very basic questions." This concrete difficulty forces us, Beardsley thinks, to first ask the *general* question "How do we know (can we really 'know') what a painting 'says'[…]?" In order to tackle the concrete difficulty of *this* interpretation we must ask how *in general* we are capable – even *if* we generally are capable – to bridge the *gap* between misunderstanding and correct understanding in interpretations of art. If we cannot answer that *general* question, we seem to be left with a situation where we are not entitled to claim that we usually can interpret what artworks mean – and thus (and therefore) not in this specific case either. Beardsley takes us from a concrete practical instance of an interpretive "hard case" into a Cartesian skeptical problematic about truth and knowledge, of how we in general can know what a painting means. At this point his problem turns into a Kantian skeptical problematic concerning the criteria of interpretation and the conditions for meaning. In order to avoid the (Cartesian) skeptical conclusion – i.e. that we in general are unable to present valid interpretations of

[419] Monroe C. Beardsley, "Introduction: The Concerns of Aesthetics," *Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. Monroe C. Beardsley, The Bobbs-Merrill Series in Composition and Rhetoric, general eds. Falk S. Johnson, James R. Kreuzer, Franklin Norvish (New York and Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merril Company Inc., 1968), p. 6.

what paintings express – Beardsley claims that "we need to produce well-reasoned answers to these questions," and "probe deeply into the nature of symbolism, of metaphor – even of truth and of the meaning of 'meaning' itself." As I demonstrated in chapter 3, questions about criteria and conditions of meaning take place on the Kantian level.

In sum, the quote above shows how Beardsley initiates his inquiries with an interpretive "hard case." This, however, leads him into a Cartesian skeptical problematic about how to separate valid interpretations from invalid ones in general. But in order to address that problematic adequately, Beardsley makes a further move into a Kantian skeptical problematic surrounding establishing the criteria of meaning ("the meaning of 'meaning'") in interpretation. That he ultimately ends in a Kantian problematic is stated clearly in *The Possibility of Criticism* where he writes: "My defense of literary interpretation, then, has to go back to the basic premises and to the basic problem, which is the problem of meaning itself."[420]

It is important to show that Beardsley actually ends up in a *skeptical* Kantian problematic, since there are passages in Beardsley that could lead one to think otherwise. For instance, the following quote from *The Possibility of Criticism* would seemingly present Beardsley as struggling with a different sort of difficulty:

> If the general title of these lectures conveys a faint echo of the famous questions with which Immanuel Kant launched his transcendental philosophy, then the title is well chosen. The echo should be there. […] [I] would not mind calling what I am doing a (partial) critique of criticism – art criticism in general, but particularly literary criticism. Just as he asked, how is science possible? How is mathematics possible? and so forth, so I am asking, in my way, How is criticism possible? That it *is* possible, we can hardly doubt, when there is so much – some would say, too much – of it. "Whatever is actual is possible" is a widely accepted ontological maxim.[421]

This quote indeed gives the impression that if Beardsley is working with a Kantian problematic, it is not of a skeptical sort. It is *how*, not *whether*, criticism is possible that Beardsley is asking here. This would challenge the right with which I call him a skeptic since, as I said in chapter 3, merely posing transcendental questions about conditions of possibility does not turn you into a Kantian *skeptic*. To elicit grammar and criteria is not skeptical in itself. It is when an account of HOW interpretation is possible is taken to show that interpretations ARE possible; it is when this account is taken to *ground* the practice of interpretation that the interpretive theorist gets entangled in a Kantian skeptical problematic. Thus, in order to drive home my point that Beardsley's thinking is skeptical at root (and unwittingly so), I

[420] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, p. 47.
[421] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, p. 9.

shall need to show that *this* is exactly the train of thought that runs through his theorizing.

However, only a page further down it becomes clear that Beardsley did not really mean "we can hardly doubt" that criticism *is* possible. In the following quote one sees that it is undoubtedly the question *whether* criticism is possible – possible as a legitimate and valid, rational, practice – that ultimately is at stake for him.

> What assumptions do we make in claiming to do criticism? And how can these assumptions themselves be justified? In my argument, however, the legitimacy of criticism is not a premise but a conclusion: it is something that calls for support and explanation. Therefore the presuppositions of criticism themselves stand in need of independent defence. Questions about the presuppositions of criticism are metacritical questions; they belong not to criticism itself but to the foundations of criticism.[422]

Here I would say that one has a clear case of the typical mixture of the questions HOW and WHETHER that generate the Kantian skeptical problematic about interpretation.

Saying this, however, I do not wish to deny that we *occasionally* find ourselves in situations where we – facing some difficulty – actually *need* a theoretical clarification in order to go on with our interpretive work. There are (of course) instances when theorizing has *direct* practical relevance and importance. I may not initially be entirely clear about the nature of an interpretive conflict and thus not know how to treat it. And I can be dissatisfied with a certain interpretation without immediately seeing what is wrong with it. A theoretical analysis of the logic and presuppositions of that interpretation, or that interpretive conflict, may help me sort out not only what I found problematical in that particular instance but also a *kind* of difficulty or fallacy that I have sensed before but have hitherto been unable to articulate. However, it is one thing to acknowledge that we – *when we really do face theoretical bewilderment in practice* – may need to make theoretical investigations and clarifications, but it is quite another (skeptical) thing to claim that our interpretive practice *as a whole* needs a foundationalist theory in order for us not to fall into confusion.

Beardsley's claim is the latter. For him the rationality and the validity of critical interpretation rests on our ability to explain theoretically how interpretive claims are possible by giving an account of the ways in which they can qualify as *knowledge claims*, that is, as claims to truth and claims of fact. In *The Possibility of Criticism*, Beardsley writes:

> It is plain that I am rather rationalistic in my view of criticism – probably more rationalistic than most critical theorists or aestheticians. It seems to me

[422] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, p. 10.

> that critics often make claims to knowledge – of what a poem is like, of what it means, of what it is worth. The problem is to assess these claims. It cannot be denied that critics engage in many other activities besides seeking and sharing knowledge, but it is this cognitive function, not the other services they perform, that I shall be concerned with. It is the possibility of *criticism as knowledge* that I am inquiring into.[423]

For Beardsley, knowing meaning is on a par with knowing facts; his is a quest to know "linguistic fact[s]".[424] He writes: "I want to discover whether critics give us knowledge about literary works, and if so, what kind of knowledge they give."[425] If we cannot show how interpretive claims yield true knowledge (of semantic or linguistic facts), Beardsley argues, then the entire authority and rationality of criticism evaporates. This would leave the critic's interpretations to be at best subjective impressions and at worst sheer *nonsense*: "in order to keep criticism from degenerating into sheer burbling, nonsensical jargon and maverick evaluations" Beardsley thinks we must scrutinize what "presupposition critics make about perception, about value, about, knowledge, about reality."[426] Here one sees how the skeptical threat presents itself to Beardsley on the Kantian level.

The skeptical threat on the *Cartesian level* concerns our ability to separate true interpretations from false ones, whereupon the theoretical task is to establish the validity of interpretations: if we cannot separate the valid from the invalid interpretations, how do we know that the distinction itself holds? How do we know that there *are* valid (true) interpretations? This threat charges academic interpreters with *not knowing*; not knowing which interpretations are valid and which are invalid, not knowing if real validity *actually* exists.

The skeptical threat on the *Kantian level*, in turn, presents itself in terms of the charge of *nonsensicality*. Here academic interpreters are charged with not really knowing what they talk about, with not really being masters of their words, with lacking proper authority regarding the criteria and grammar of interpretation. Or in Beardsley's words: with "burbling."

5.1.1. Creating Gaps while Trying to Close Them: Turning the Literary "Object" into a "Moon"

I think one can characterize Beardsley's understanding of his Cartesian skeptical problematic in terms of three levels of *gaps* that need to be bridged. First, there is a gap on the *concrete level of interpretation*, between on the one hand a multitude of readings we can make of a poem (among them many

[423] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, pp. 12–13.
[424] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 10.
[425] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, p. 14.
[426] Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 6.

possible *mis*readings) and, on the other, the correct reading and the right interpretation of that poem. In order to bridge that gap we must, however, enter another level of the problematic and ask ourselves what constitutes poetic meaning and interpretive validity *in general*.

At this second level we face an analogous problem: we encounter a variety of *competing theoretical accounts* about the criteria of valid interpretation and the gap to be bridged is now between what we take to be the true theoretical analysis of the nature of interpretation and what really is the true analysis; the true theory must be distinguished from any false pretenders. On this level, the battle between different theories of "WHAT interpretation is" and "HOW it is possible" (to speak with Taylor) is fought. Like the anti-intentionalism of Beardsley and Wimsatt, the intentionalists have their own theoretical renderings of what constitutes literary meaning, what counts as an accurate understanding, and have at their disposal what they posit to be the correct criteria of validity in interpretation.

Since Beardsley furthermore thinks of literary meaning in terms of a *factual property* of the literary work, the relevant theory of interpretation must in turn be founded upon a true account of what sort of *object* the literary work is. The nature of the literary object then, is the third level on which the presence of a gap is to be closed. Beardsley asks: what are the true properties of the literary work as an *aesthetic object* in contrast to other objects?[427]

> The first thing required to make criticism possible is an object to be criticized – something for the critic to interpret and judge, with its own properties against which interpretations and judgments can be checked. […] What does the literary interpreter do? He tells us what a literary work means. And whatever else it is, a literary work is first of all a text, a piece of language. So what the interpreter reveals is the meaning of a text. But what is that?[428]

It is this conception of the literary work as constituted by layers of possibly deceptive appearances requiring theoretical penetration that accounts for Beardsley's and Wimsatt's quite astonishing fear that certain readings of a poem can in fact fail to be readings of "it" at all – that these readings rather make the poem "disappear." Readings that lack the right theoretical insight into the nature of the literary object (as an aesthetic object), and thus of literature's own mode of meaning-making (in general), will, according to them, risk, so to speak, an unwitting investigation into *the wrong thing*. Indeed, affective and intentionalist readers do precisely that, Wimsatt and Beardsley argue. The proponents of such perspectives confuse what the poem "*is*" with "what it *does*." What such readers attend to will not be *the real poem* at all but something else, something external. Behind the surface of poems, and how we *ordinarily* read them and understand them, there is a real poetic,

[427] Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, pp. 59–60.
[428] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, pp. 16–17.

aesthetic object and it is precisely this that every reader must succeed in grasping: "The critic's first task, when confronted with an aesthetic object, is to see what that object is. Everything else he may do with it depends on this."[429]

In order for the critic to be able, in a concrete instance, to check his or her interpretation against the poem, he or she must *first* be aware of the general properties and features that constitute poems as aesthetic objects in the first place. First we need to "state the criteria by which people who are interested in such things as painting, poems, and musical compositions, distinguish works of art from other things. […] The question is, then, how to distinguish aesthetic objects, from other perceptual objects."[430] Based on the knowledge of the object, a *method* should then be developed that accurately picks out the meaning: "The possibility of criticism depends not only on the existence of a text, an object susceptible of independent study, but also on the availability of a kind of method or principled procedure, by which proposed interpretations can be tested and can be shown to succeed or fail as attempts to make textual meanings explicit."[431]

I think two things are clear from this. Regardless of his opposing view on the role of intention, Beardsley is clearly closer to Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory than to Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy. Furthermore, the interpreter's situation according to Beardsley is strikingly similar to the position of the external-world skeptic, or perhaps rather his or her skeptical twin; both construe the problem of knowing the object in terms of the presence of a gap between "appearances" and "the real." Though there is a specific kind of tension here, created by the fact that Beardsley is talking about poems and their meanings, and *not* about physical objects. And this tension is indeed something of which Beardsley is partly aware. There are certain difficulties involved in grasping the true features of the literary object, and these particular difficulties, claims Beardsley, have to do with literature's peculiar mode or form of linguistic existence: "A poem can *be* only through its *meaning* – since its medium is words – yet it *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what parts are intended or meant."[432] This makes it, according to Beardsley and Wimsatt, even harder to grasp the poem's true nature, its special kind of objecthood. In *Aesthetics* Beardsley elaborates on the particular *elusiveness* he perceives in the literary object *as an object*, compared to "normal" physical objects.

> [W]hatever else a literary work may be, it is inescapably a sequence of words. This means, for one thing, that it is not fully and immediately sensuous in the way that music and painting are. […] [Q]ualities like redness and

[429] Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 75.
[430] Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 59–60.
[431] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, p. 57.
[432] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 4.

> gracefulness and calmness are referred to, rather than presented. Because a poem is a piece of language, a verbal construction, *it is less solidly there as an object* than, say, a building or a sculpture; *it is not so easy to point to*, and *in a way that makes it more subject to dispute*. But still, in an extended sense, the poem, once written, is a kind of object: it can be read and enjoyed and discussed by many different people; it leads a life of its own quite independent of the hopes or wishes of the author.[433]

This passage shows how Beardsley's preferred way of describing poems *as* physical things results in a kind of mixture of features from two forms of Cartesian skepticism, namely skepticism surrounding the external world and meaning. Or, rather, Beardsley tends to describe his Cartesian problematic about "knowing meaning" in terms which rather seem to belong to the problematic of external-world skepticism. He wants to describe the poem as an *object* – but in doing so the poem starts slipping away. It becomes something that suddenly is very "hard to point to," something "less solidly *there*."

What Beardsley means (of course) is not that it is hard to point to the page on which the poem is written or printed, or to some concrete passage or stanza. It is not an ordinary, concrete, or *practical* difficulty he is addressing. The difficulty here to be articulated is analogous to the one the external-world skeptic and his or her twin encounter, when they stare at the tomato, the envelope, or the hand, in order to really fix it, to make it present, to make it *real*. In the following quote I think Cavell's description of the predicament of the skeptical twin fits Beardsley perfectly. He advises us to look at

> the philosopher's extraordinary treatment of objects, as in Descartes's wax that is melting, Price's tomato with nothing but its visual front aspect remaining, in Moore's raised moving hands, in Heidegger's blossoming tree, to explore the sense of hyperbolic, unprecedented attention in play. It is not just careful description, or practical investigation, under way here. The philosopher is as it were looking for a *response* from the object, perhaps a shining.[434]

Beardsley, as a skeptical twin surrounding interpretation, as well as the external-world skeptic and the epistemologist to which Cavell makes explicit reference, all feel that they, in a certain way, have to *penetrate* the apparent features of the object in order to grasp its *real* nature. It is precisely *in that process*, though, I argue, "that that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear." That is the irony of Beardsley's enterprise: it is through Beardsley's theoretical efforts to *really* "point to" the "the literary object" that the literary work starts to slip away from him, suddenly appearing "less solidly there." This approach can be contrasted to Woolf's and Stein's artistic responses to the difficulties of modernist uncer-

[433] Beardsley, "Introduction: The Concerns of Aesthetics," *Literature and Aesthetics*, p. 8. (My italics.)
[434] Cavell, "Introduction," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 8.

tainty (and also, as I will argue in chapter 7, to Sontag's way of understanding what it means to make art real to us in criticism). Woolf and Stein offer distinct ways of making literature real to us again by boldly inviting us to rethink criteria through their works. The problem with Beardsley's position is that he wants a theory that has already stabilized criteria *before* he sets out to interpret these works.

At this juncture I would like to return to Fischer. When discussing the skepticism he finds lurking within deconstruction, Fischer quotes Cavell saying that the "skeptical picture is one in which all our objects are moons. In which the earth is our moon."[435] Fischer links this passage to deconstruction's "battering" of the textual object. The external-world skeptic denies we can really know that the object is *there* because we cannot see it from all angles at once (for "what if it's a fake," "what if I'm dreaming," etc.?), denying thereby the criteria and procedures by which we ordinarily establish that a certain thing is present, replacing that criteria with some absolute criteria we can never meet. Similarly, Fischer suggests, deconstruction's rejection of stable meanings in literature and language actually hinges on an absolute and artificial understanding of what "stable meanings" are in practice. Textual stability is first construed by the deconstructionist as being of the metaphysical, absolute, kind that he or she wants to criticize. And since the criteria of stable meaning is construed in such an absolute manner no text or ordinary way of understanding or interpreting a text can (of course) ever live up to it. This in turn accounts for the deconstructionist's disappointment by, and denial of, our ordinary interpretive procedures for assessing the meaning of a text. Since we cannot reach *that* "absolute meaning," the deconstructionist concludes that meaning cannot ultimately be determined.[436] This is how a text never seems fully present for the deconstructionist: it will always be at a distance, never fully reached, like the moon. Fischer describes this situation as an occasion of theoretical *avoidance* on the part of deconstruction.

> Avoidance, as Cavell describes it, first shows up in the deconstructionist's often-noted insistence on certainty and theoretical rigor. […] Suspiciously interrogating the text and demanding to see all of it turn the text into an intellectual difficulty or riddle. The text vanishes with the effort to make it present, becoming a blank corpse, mysterious shell, indecipherable maze, or impenetrable stone […] – hence the feeling that deconstructionists do violence to the text, even smother it with their theoretical concerns. In any case, the text dies or at least loses the intelligibility and life found in it by previous critics, sometimes even by deconstructionists in their earlier work.[437]

[435] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 202, also quoted in Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 26.
[436] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, pp. 30–35.
[437] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, pp. 98–99.

However, while Fischer explicitly says that it is the idiom of New Criticism against which deconstructive literary theorists in particular react in their denial of the presence of the textual object, it never seems to strike Fischer that the skeptical problematic of the "literary object" is already present *within* the New Critical idiom itself. While it may not be true of all New Critics, the above passage nevertheless speaks very well to the theorizing of Beardsley and Wimsatt. In their epistemological project to establish an absolute presence and reality of the literary object – to make it real through theory: to bring out its true features as an *aesthetic object* – the poem turns into a distant "moon" which we ordinary readers will never be able to reach unless we are informed by the proper theory. This constitutes, I argue, in fact an *avoidance* of these difficult cases; Beardsley and Wimsatt are insensitive to the singular invitations we receive from speciously modernist works of literature (such as, the works of Stein and Woolf) by wanting to have recourse to a general theory that tell them *in advance* how to respond to such invitations.

5.1.2. An Alternative Way to Theorize on a "Hard Case." Cavell's Response to Critical Uncertainty

Am I though not being a little uncharitable toward Beardsley? Even if I have acknowledged that there are occasions when we strike upon difficulties in our interpretive work, which we *need* to theorize on, I may have sounded as if these difficulties were necessarily strictly *local* problems. That is, I may have given the impression that I think that such occasions of theoretical bewilderment or difficulty could *never* engender, or grow into, more general theoretical problematics without simultaneously becoming *skeptical*. If, however, I have given that impression, and thereby have seemed uncharitable to Beardsley, I hope to set things right by now initiating a closer dialogue between Beardsley and Cavell.

Is it not, one could ask, more or less an interpretive *fact* that certain instances of what I have called interpretive "hard cases" can leave us with theoretical questions (and answers) whose range and concern go beyond that particular case which brought the problem to our attention? And was not Beardsley, in part at least, registering and voicing that fact when he recounted the "hard case" of trying to understand the surrealist painting? Could not such an occasion also reveal a *real* difficulty of a more general sort, namely, we realize that we no longer feel confident about how to interpret validly? Through this particular instance, we seem no longer to know what the literary object (or what *literature*) is. And even if we put the problem otherwise, that is, if we thought we had succeeded in overcoming such a concrete difficulty of interpretation, might not that instance alter what we think we know and can know about interpretation and literature?

In carefully answering "yes" to these questions I would like to draw out what I shall call "the truth in interpretive skepticism," as it can be elicited by the confrontation with a hard case. I hope that this "truth" of interpretive skepticism – which is not the same as saying that interpretive skepticism is *true* – will become more visible once one has considered certain passages in Cavell that discuss the advent of *modernism* and the difficulties of interpretation to which this gave rise. I will discuss the problem modernism poses for criticism and the New Critics more fully in my treatment of Brooks, specifically these issues will be addressed in light of the problematic Cavell calls the possibility of *fraudulence* in art, a possibility especially acute in modernist art. However, I shall touch upon this subject already here since it serves to cast light on how certain instances of interpretive *hard cases* can make us *rightfully* uncertain about what literature is and can be, and by extension what interpretation is and can be. These are matters to which I think Beardsley's theorizing about the literary object speaks but nevertheless misunderstands.

In "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It," Cavell confronts New Criticism and Beardsley on the role of intention and theory in both art and criticism. In this context one finds an interesting scenario which, when compared to Beardsley's surrealist painting, gives the opposite outcome of a confrontation with a "hard case." Rather than generating general bewilderment as a consequence of one instance of uncertainty, the general bewilderment is caused by a perplexing *lack of* uncertainty in a specific case. If Beardsley's example of the surrealist painting reminds us of situations where uncertainty ensues about how we are to make sense of a piece of art, Cavell's case will remind us of a contrary sense of surprise and bewilderment we may feel when presented with something we could not *in advance* have imagined as making sense as art, but which we nevertheless accept as such when we meet it face-to-face. Cavell describes such a situation in the context of experiencing a sculpture by Anthony Caro (1924 – 2013).[438] This particular "hard case" had such a generative effect for Cavell that the acceptance or rejection of it *as being a sculpture at all* would simultaneously raise the more general "question of what sculpture is."[439] In "A Matter of Meaning It" he writes:

> I had – I take it everyone had – thought (assumed? Imagined? – but no one word is going to be quite right, and that must itself require a philosophical account) that a piece of sculpture was something *worked* (carved, chipped, polished, etc.); but Caro uses steel rods and beams and sheets which he does not work (e.g., bend or twist) but rather, one could say, *places*. I had thought that a piece of sculpture had the coherence of a natural object, that it was

[438] J.M. Bernstein discusses Cavell's encounter with the sculpture of Caro in an excellent way in chapter 3, of his *Against Voluptuous Bodies*.
[439] Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," *Must We Mean What We Say?,* p. 216.

> what I wish to call spatially closed or spatially continuous (or consisted of a group of objects of such coherence); but a Caro may be open and discontinuous, one of its parts not an outgrowth from another, nor even joined or connected with another so much as it is juxtaposed to it, or an inflection from it. I had thought a piece of sculpture stood on a base (or crouched in a pediment, etc.) and rose; but a Caro rests on the raw ground and do not so much rise as spread or reach or open.[440]

The trouble Cavell faced here was *not* the uncertainty whether to accept this piece of purported sculpture *as* sculpture – a problematic that would be closer to the problem which Beardsley voiced about the surrealist painting (do we know what it means, do we know what it is, is it even art?) – but the kind of *twin* difficulty implied in such a situation, namely the instance of a *successful* hard case, in which Cavell felt "stuck with the knowledge that this is sculpture."[441] Even if this work clearly radically challenged his previous understanding of the grammatical criteria of sculpture, he could not *but* accept it as sculpture. But then the outcome of this particular hard case had effects beyond itself with regard to his understanding of what sculptures are and can be: "The problem is that I no longer know what sculpture is, why I call *any* object, the most central or traditional, a piece of sculpture. How *can* objects made this way elicit the experience I had thought confined to objects made so differently?"[442] If he accepted *this* instance as a sculpture, the grammar of the concept of "sculpture" would no longer be the same. Cavell would then have to "conclude that the art of sculpture does not (or does no longer) depend on figuration, on being worked, on spatial continuity, etc." and he would have to ask: "Then what does it depend on? […] Then we no longer know what kind of object a piece of sculpture (grammatically) is."[443]

But is not the Cavellian example precisely saying that skepticism about what the aesthetic object is – what the literary object is, what we can say about it in criticism – is a *real* threat? Is this not the same as saying that skepticism is true? Is this not what the acceptance of his hard case reveals to us: that we no longer know what sculpture is? And if so then might this not *prove* that Beardsley was right all along, that we really need a theory of the literary object, of the criteria of meaningfulness in literature, and of the criteria of valid interpretation, *before* we face the hard cases? Does our knowledge not otherwise threaten to evaporate with the fate of a singular hard case?

However, this is not the moral Cavell draws from his example, nor is it one I wish to draw. The singular hard case here does indeed have a generative effect on our knowledge of the criteria, but what it shows is not that

[440] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 216–217.
[441] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 218.
[442] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 218.
[443] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 218.

skepticism about art or criticism is *true*. What it shows is that when artforms (like sculpture, literature and music) *change* radically (as they do in modernism), criticism must change too – it must find its feet in a new situation. Cavell takes up this question when he writes:

> [T]he music of Schoenberg and Webern, the sculpture of Caro, the painting of Morris Louis, the theatre of Brecht and Beckett – really does challenge the art of which it is the inheritor and voice. Each is, in a word, not merely modern, but modernist. Each, one could say, is trying to find the limits or essence of its own procedures. And this means that it is not clear a priori what counts, or will count, as a painting, or sculpture or musical composition… So we haven't got clear criteria for determining whether a given object is or is not a painting, a sculpture… But this is exactly what our whole discussion has prepared us for. The task of the modernist artist, as of the contemporary critic, is to find what it is his art finally depends upon; it doesn't matter that we haven't a priori criteria for defining painting, what matters is that we realize that criteria are something we must discover, discover in the continuity of painting itself. But my point now is that to discover this we need to discover what objects we *accept* as paintings, and why we so accept them.[444]

Modernist art forms are themselves exploring and challenging the limits of their own criteria. They ask what they can change, and what they can become, and yet still remain themselves: "what the modern puts in question is not merely, so to speak, itself, but its tradition as a whole."[445] This will pose *real* difficulties for readers, including the readers that are critics, in terms of knowing what that art now is, what it can be – and how to interpret it. What will *now* count as appropriate approaches to it? What interpretive questions and procedures will *now* be valid?

Interpreters of such art are more or less *forced* – or at the very least are clearly *invited* – to ask those very same philosophical questions about art with which the art directly deals and take as its problems. So in the case of literature, modernist poetry asks: what is poetry, what is it to read a poem, what is it to understand it? How could an interpreter of such literature not also need to ask these questions, since they have been tangibly felt in and through the criticism of that literature? These are indeed questions about grammar and criteria – only, they are not skeptical ones.

Accordingly, I do *not* claim that we *never* have to ask general questions about meaning and the possibility of meaning when immersed in the concrete difficulties of interpreting art and literature, nor am I suggesting that such concrete instances may not have consequences beyond the singularity of the case. However, there is a difference between, on the one hand, being *invited* to philosophize on such matters by an artwork, and complying with

[444] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 219.
[445] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 222. I will return to Cavell's theorizing on modernism in chapter 6 when I investigate the aesthetic and poetic skepticism to which Brooks responds.

such an invitation, and, on the other hand, to have a general theory which demands that you have already reached your general conclusions about what constitutes meaningfulness in art *before* encountering a particular artwork (and addressing the specific questions it issues forth).

I would even say that proceeding in the manner Beardsley does runs counter to accepting the invitation that such artworks deliver to us. If, like Beardsley, you think you need to be *armed* with a theory of art (or literature) *before* you try to interpret such an artwork, so as to be authoritative in tackling its questions, then you have already decided upon answers to the very questions which the artwork wanted you to work on – namely what (that) art is. Looking at the artwork through the lenses of such a theory might not only lead to an unfortunate filtering of what you can see *of that art work* (you may, for example, project certain demands on the artwork that otherwise hamper what you can see of it). Such a foundationalist theory will furthermore shift the balance of power, the distribution of *authority*, between you (and your theoretical outlook) on the one hand, and the articulation of the problematic as expressed by the artwork itself on the other.

The risk is of course that you will be unwilling to engage on equal terms with the artwork in order to negotiate how such fundamental questions should be tackled, or you may be insensitive to how *it* is trying to tackle and articulate them, if that articulation does not square with your pre-established theory. It is to favor monologue over dialogue: to speak above and about, instead of with and by the work. You have thus given yourself (to speak with the surface-readers from chapter one) a kind of Gods-eye-view of the work that forecloses the discovery of any alternative vision of it. Not only do you risk not hearing what the artwork says about the conditions of meaningfulness (in art more generally as well as in its own case) but you may miss out on an occasion in which something new could have been learnt – something you cannot learn by looking at the art through a pre-given theory but only by letting the art *theorize with you*.[446]

[446] I think that David Rudrum makes a similar point, though not with special reference to Beardsley, in his introduction to *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*: ”Rather than approach these texts from afar, viewing them through the lens of a theory that constructs the critical difference we perceive between ourselves and it, Cavell prefers that literature itself teach us how to approach it and, indeed, whether any closer proximity to it – so often wistful fantasy of intimacy – is necessary or even desirable. Perhaps this is a roundabout way of saying that instead of needing a set of theoretical terms with which to approach literature, we must learn to read it on its own terms.” Rudrum, *Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, p. 7. However, even if I to a great extent share Rudrum’s view here, I sense a kind of either-or stance toward theories in him that I do not share. As I will argue in chapter 7, ”theory” need not be something that constitutes a distancing lens, but can, at times, on the contrary be what brings life and intimacy back to our relation with literature. What I am critiquing here is not ”theory” or ”method” in general but theory *done in a certain spirit and form*, and method of a certain kind, one which is grounded in a skeptical construal of the essence of literature and interpretation.

Beardsley is thus making what I have called an escape to theory by trying to define the "hard cases" away through a theory. When Beardsley tries to "state the criteria by which people […] distinguish works of art from other things" in general he is not *really* solving the problem of how to treat and understand the real hard cases.[447] Such a theory does not assist us when we *actually* become unsure whether something presenting itself as art *should* be distinguished from other things, whether it should be considered as art, and if so *why* it should. Rather, Beardsley is making it possible to *ignore* those real difficulties on principle. By defining the "aesthetic object" in a certain way (and therewith literary meaning alongside what constitutes a valid interpretation too) the *real* difficulties of literary hard cases, as well as those difficulties of a more general theoretical nature, are not addressed but *avoided*.

Cavell makes more or less the same point in "A Matter of Meaning It" when he writes that "Beardsley's solution is to define a notion of art (i.e., music) broad enough to include the problematic objects."[448] While Cavell is more specifically discussing the problem of "fraudulence" in art, I think his remark also has bearing on the topic I am discussing here. The problematic of how to deal with a hard case will not be solved through a wider definition of the artform.[449] As Cavell points out, "the redefinition or extended application of the term […] is not what is needed […] – a problem has not been solved, but made invisible."[450] The same, I argue, holds for Beardsley's theory of interpretive validity regarding literature. In the light of such a theory the problems of how to interpret literature – when we *actually* find it difficult, and when such difficulties raise theoretical issues about the criteria of meaningfulness and validity in interpretation – will not be solved but become *invisible*.

The fact that interpretive hard cases can leave us with a sudden pang of no longer knowing how to interpret does *not*, however, entail interpretive skepticism. What it implies is that literature is a living, changing, concept, since *literature* is a living changing body of things. What will count as literature, and as valid interpretations of that literature, will depend upon the *practice* of literature, of what is written with claims to be literature, and on what we acknowledge, accept as literature, as well as on the *practice* of interpretation and what we can recognize as validity in that practice. This means that hard cases have to be treated *piecemeal*. What the modernist "hard cases" can be taken to show is rather that literature is not the technical, expertise Austinian

[447] Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 59.
[448] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 213. Cavell is here responding to Beardsley's comments on "Music Discomposed." I will address this dispute in the second part of the chapter.
[449] Beardsley writes in his comments to Cavell's "Music Discomposed": "it is enough to give the term 'music' a broad sense that will accommodate anything that anyone could possibly have any excuse for calling music." Monroe C. Beardsley, "Comments," *Art, Mind and Religion: Proceedings of the 1965 Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy*, eds. W.H. Capitan and D.D. Merrill (Liverpool, London, Prescot: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967), p. 107.
[450] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 214.

concept Beardsley tries to turn it into. Its grammatical (Wittgensteinian) criteria will not be restricted by technical definitions. At least not as long as critics and literary scholars have the ambition to attend to literature that is actually written, that is out there, and not merely to possible theoretical definitions of "literature." "In this [modernist] situation, criticism stands, or could, or should stand, in an altered relation to the art it serves. At any time it is subordinate to that art," Cavell writes.[451] Beardsley, on the other hand, seems unwilling to accept that both critic and philosopher are subordinate to the literature under investigation. It is as if Beardsley was trying to switch the order, as if it was literature that was subordinate to philosophy's or criticism's philosophical definitions. I claim that Beardsley's approach is not the theoretical exploration of grammatical criteria that we are in need of (when we need it). Instead it exemplifies *avoidance* of literature and of literature's claims, of literature's questions about its criteria. It constitutes a *denial* of those criteria through an escape to theory.

5.2. Beardsley as a Skeptic about Intention: "The Intentional Fallacy" and Literary Skepticism about Other Minds.

It is interesting to consider the fact that some notable aspects of Cavell's thought have caught the attention of a wider field of scholars. For example, Cavell's discussions of the similarities that exist between ordinary language philosophy and criticism, his reflections on the relations between modernism and philosophy as well as between literature and philosophy. However, it seems to me that Cavell's recurring interest in New Critical theorizing has not captured the imagination of the scholarly community to the same extent. A substantial part of Cavell's critical engagement with the New Critics is directed toward Beardsley's and Wimsatt's anti-intentionalism.[452] It is perhaps no wonder then that the one who has, to my knowledge, given this topic in Cavell's work most attention also signals his surprise at the lack of impact Cavell's treatment of intentionality in literature has hitherto had. In Chapter 2 of *The Claim of Literature*, David Rudrum has a section called "Embodiments of Authorial Intention," which begins:

[451] Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 207.
[452] Stephen Mulhall touches upon Cavell's discussion of authorial intention in the introduction to *The Cavell Reader*, especially on pp. 15–17, and in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, pp. 190–195. Espen Hammer mentions Cavell's discussion of artistic intention briefly in *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*, p. 101. The one who has discussed it most extensively is to my knowledge, Rudrum in *The Claim of Literature*.

> Of all the aspects of Cavell's work on literature and on aesthetics more generally, his engagement with issues of authorship and intentionality are probably the most extensive, ambitious, and complex. What is more, this issue is one of the most live and emotive topics in the history of literary criticism: […] The subject is a hardy perennial for undergraduate essays in introductory critical theory courses, but Cavell's contribution to the debate seems to feature on the reading lists for such courses only rarely, if at all. Why is this?[453]

To see more clearly what Cavell's take on the role of authorial intention is, Rudrum furthermore suggests that we should "turn […] toward the New Critics' position, with which Cavell's early writings on this subject engage directly."[454] Rudrum correctly registers that Cavell critiques Wimsatt and Beardsley's anti-intentionalism, and he also approvingly cites Stephen Mulhall's comments on Cavell and authorial intentions: "Cavell takes the notion of 'intention' with which he is working to be the ordinary, familiar one; so he takes recent critical attempts to dissuade us from employing it to be based on metaphysical misinterpretations of this concept."[455] While I agree with Rudrum and Mulhall on this point, I think that Mulhall makes Cavell seem too much like an intentionalist (I will come back to why I do not think Cavell is an intentionalist in 5.3), and while Rudrum also signals his dissatisfaction with that characterization, he does not really explicate why it would be incorrect.[456] More to the point, with regard to the specific aims of this section of my argument, while both Mulhall and Rudrum investigate Cavell's understanding of authorial intention in literature in relation to his critique of New Criticism, none of them really investigate the anti-intenionalism of Beardsley and Wimsatt as a specific form of literary other-minds skepticism.

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[453] Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 74.
[454] Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 76.
[455] Mulhall, "Introduction," *The Cavell Reader*, p. 17. Also quoted in Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 77.
[456] In the introduction to *The Cavell Reader* Mulhall writes that Cavell presupposes that "the significance of the ordering of words which comprise a given text is something meant or intended by its author." Mulhall, "Introduction," *The Cavell Reader*, p. 17. To my ears this might sound slightly too intentionalist. Rudrum is also hesitant about this formulation, though his reasons for disagreeing with Mulhall here are a bit evasive. He writes: "It is not that Cavell does not endorse this presupposition, nor that this presupposition is wrong […]. It is rather that the remarkable degree of autonomy Cavell's readings grant Shakespeare's characters affords them a status of critical independence from the overarching intentions of their author." Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature,* p. 72. Rudrum, in turn, says that "Cavell can sometimes seem downright self-contradictory" with regard to the role of authorial intention. On the one hand he has a "proauthorial stance," on the other, his writings "also contain what appear to be some flat endorsements of a clearly *anti*authorial, anti-intentional position," according to Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, pp. 74–75. In my view there is no contradiction at all. Cavell is neither a (theoretical) intentionalist nor a (theoretical) anti-intentionalist. He acknowledges that intentions are essential for us to understand literature as art at all (what kind of thing literature is) but he does not claim that every reading must aim at the author's intentions. This will be discussed in 5.3.

That is what I intend to do in this second part of the chapter. I will explore what I take as the literary skepticism of other minds inherent in Beardsley's anti-intentionalism. Moreover, I argue that even if Cavell never explicitly formulates it in terms of "skepticism" (he does not use the s-word in this context), in effect his critique of Wimsatt and Beardsley exposes their anti-intentionalism as a literary form of other-minds skepticism.

One can begin by noting that the critique of New Criticism figures in some of Cavell's most central texts on art and criticism and his discussion of New Criticism is intimately related to the concerns of modernism as a philosophical, critical, and artistic problem. It is also interesting to see that one of Cavell's most well-known texts on other-minds skepticism, his reading of *King Lear*: "The Avoidance of Love," is also in part engaged in contesting New Critical ideas about interpretation.[457] The most direct critique of Beardsley, however, can be found in the two essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* already mentioned: "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning it." The first of these two texts was presented at a conference Beardsley himself attended; Beardsley subsequently wrote a response to it. This response in turn caused Cavell to write "A Matter of Meaning It," in which Cavell goes on to clarify his critique.[458]

"Music Discomposed" is a piece that appears to be principally concerned with how to discern whether some developments in music should warrant the

[457] Here the reference to New Criticism is made while Cavell is reflecting on the validity, logic, and nature of his own philosophical interpretation. The most central question concerns the very legitimacy of Cavell's claim that Shakespearean plays are informed by other-minds skepticism. If his reading of Shakespeare is valid, if Cavell can legitimately claim that the skeptical problem *is* at work there (which then can help us see the skeptical problem in a new way, as an existential and moral tragedy rather than an epistemological riddle), then what does this say about the logic of interpretation and interpretive argumentation? If his readings are justified, if what he sees in the texts *can* really be seen in these texts, Cavell asks, then how come it has not been seen before? This is an interesting question, but slightly peripheral in relation to my concerns, so I will not discuss it here.

[458] Neither Beardsley nor Joseph Margolis, for that matter, were receptive to Cavell's criticisms. Both Beardsley and Margolis wrote responses to Cavell's paper. These can be found in *Art, Mind and Religion*, Margolis, pp. 98–102, Beardsley, pp. 103–109. I will not discuss Beardsley's response here since it centers on Cavell's discussion of "fraudulence" and has little to contribute to the discussion of Beardsley's anti-intentionalism. The problem of "fraudulence" in art and criticism will instead be treated in chapter 6 when I discuss Brooks. I find Brooks's debate with Max Eastman and the role of "evidence" in interpretation to be a more suitable object of comparison for Cavell's analysis of "fraudulence" than Beardsley's response. Cavell's rejoinder later became "A Matter of Meaning it," and can also be found in *Art, Mind and Religion*, pp. 110–132. To me it is quite clear that Beardsley never understands the problematic Cavell wants to discuss in terms of "fraudulence." In any case Beardsley remains convinced in his anti-intentionalism: "It seems to me, in fact, that Cavell draws the wrong moral about sincerity from contemporary art. […] It seems rather to me that these contemporary developments merely underline a fact that was fairly plain before, namely that sincerity is irrelevant to the proper interests and concerns of the viewer and listener. The issue [of sincerity and fraudulence] is not forced, but (finally) laid to rest." Beardsley, "Comments," *Art, Mind and Religion*, p.106.

term "composition" or not.[459] This is, however, not what is really at stake in the text. The most central topic it addresses is rather the problem that Cavell names "fraudulence" in art and art criticism, a problematic I will discuss in chapter 6, in relation to Brooks and *aesthetic* (in his case specifically *poetic*) *skepticism*. Another important topic of the essay is the role of *intention* in art and criticism, which I will focus on here.

In the very beginning of the essay Cavell clearly takes his stance against anti-intentionalism. This does not mean that he denies that the "appeal to intention can *in fact* be inappropriate or distracting or evasive, as it can in moral contexts; no doubt it frequently is in some of the work of the literary historians and aestheticians opposed by the New Criticism."[460] As a *critique* of traditional biographical criticism Cavell admits that New Criticism occasionally has a valid case. He furthermore agrees with Beardsley and Wimsatt (and probably most people involved with literary interpretation), that an appeal to what the artist *intended* to do but did not succeed in doing cannot change what has actually been done *into* what he or she wanted to do: "the concept of intention does not function, as elsewhere, as a term of excuse or justification."[461] Thus Cavell opposes not the critical edge of New Criticism, directed as it is towards reductive biographical readings, rather what he does criticizes is the idea "that the artist's intention is *always* irrelevant."[462]

In Michel Fischer's *Literary Skepticism* one finds a forceful and, I think, very convincing exploration of other-minds skepticism within a certain strand of interpretive theory. Particularly in chapter 3: "Reading the Human Figure: Literary Theory and Other-Minds Skepticism," Fischer claims there is an inherent skeptical outlook in the theorizations of language that underlie the works of Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Jacques Derrida. Fischer effectively demonstrates how skeptical fantasies of necessary inexpressibility in language dog (some of) deconstruction's theorizing on literature and interpretation. This becomes visible for instance in the following passage from Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971), quoted in Fischer:

> We know that our entire social language is an intricate system of rhetorical devices designed to escape from the direct expression of desires that are, in the fullest sense of the term, unnameable – not because they are ethically shameful (for this would make the problem a very simple one), but because unmediated expression is a philosophical impossibility.[463]

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[459] This is in part how Beardsley and Margolis read it. Margolis signals that he is slightly unsure of what Cavell's problem really is, while Beardsley reads it as a problem of how to define music – and art – in general.
[460] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 225–226.
[461] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 198.
[462] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p.181.
[463] Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). p. 9. Quoted in Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 49.

For de Man the condition of other-minds skepticism, while presumably present in literary discourse, is not something uniquely befalling literature: "The same discrepancy exists in everyday language, in the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies."[464] Fischer finds a similar conception of the inexpressibility of language in J. Hillis Miller's *The Linguistic Moment* (1985) where Miller writes: "Any printed poem means death, the imminent approach of death, but it is also dead. It is the corpse of its meaning, the spirit turned letter, mute marks on paper. The poem on the page is a dead body."[465] Commenting on this Fischer writes:

> In […] Miller […] the radical otherness of poems goes hand in hand with the radical otherness of people. Miller pictures the unintelligibility of people and texts in various ways – as a distance we cannot traverse, a veil we cannot lift, a barrier we cannot penetrate, and a wound we cannot close. Efforts to bridge this gap […] necessarily fail […]. Despite our wishes, the other, whether a poem or a person, remains forever inscrutable – a blankness that we cannot decipher; a welter of merely indirect traces, confusing sounds, and equivocal signs that we cannot sort through; a dead body that will not come to life; mute marks that will not become legible; a forever-vanishing illusion that we can never pin down.[466]

I argue that a comparable case of literary other-minds skepticism can be found in Beardsley and Wimsatt's anti-intentionalism and that Cavell's critique of Beardsley and Wimsatt *is* a critique of a special kind of literary other-minds skepticism. This means that not only is Beardsley a *skeptical twin* about interpretation, he is also a straightforward *skeptic* about authorial intention in literature. What sets Beardsley's and Wimsatt's literary other-minds skepticism apart from the one Fischer traces among the deconstructionists, though, is that Wimsatt and Beardsley distinctly limit this problem of knowing other minds to the literary (as well as more broadly aesthetic) sphere. In their view it is not the case that we can never really know what others think and feel in ordinary life or in everyday exchanges; intentions are not inaccessible to others in other forms of discourse. It is only in literature (and other forms of art) that intentions are "neither available nor desirable." This, in a sense, confines their literary or interpretive other-minds skepticism to a problem squarely associated with *literary,* or *aesthetic, other-minds skepticism*, as opposed to the kind Fischer investigates. Which in turn has to do with Beardsley and Wimsatt's theoretical conception of literature as an

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[464] de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 11, Quoted in Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 50.
[465] J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 105. Quoted in Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 46.
[466] Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 48.

aesthetic object distinct from other forms of objects and from other orders of discourse.

In his analysis of other-minds skepticism, Cavell lets literature interpret the problem of skepticism through readings of Shakespearean tragedies. What this reveals, according to Cavell, is that what the skeptic understands as the inability to *know* the other is rather his or her failure to *acknowledge* the other: "along the fact that both skepticism and tragedy conclude with the condition of human separation, with a discovering that I am I: and the fact that the alternative to my acknowledgment of the other is not my ignorance of him but my avoidance of him, call it my denial of him."[467] Other-minds skepticism is not, at heart, the epistemological problem the skeptic takes it to be, but a lived, existential predicament the skeptic misunderstands in his or her effort to avoid it.

In his introduction to *Disowning Knowledge* Cavell writes "what philosophy knows as doubt, Othello's violence allegorizes (or recognizes) as some form of jealousy."[468] According to Cavell's interpretation of *Othello*, the murderous jealousy of the main character is not a jealousy proper. The problem of Othello is only superficially stated in terms of him actually *doubting* Desdemona's faithfulness, even if he could be said to have good reason to do so since he is presented with faked evidence of her infidelity. What Othello cannot accept, Cavell claims, is that Desdemona *does* love him. Or rather, what he cannot accept is the *conditions* of her love: that it is *hers* to give. Othello's need of Desdemona's love has no power over her love in the sense that his need cannot force that love into existence. The love is *given* – and therefore it could (possibly) also be withheld. In relation to this love, the otherwise so mighty Othello finds himself powerless: "He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain's captain."[469]

What turns Othello's "jealousy" into (lived) skepticism, then, is his inability to accept their *separateness*; that she is *another*, a person with a mind of her own. The fact that she is truly a real other being means that she is someone whose mind he will only know if he commits himself to the dangerous conditions that come with knowing others; with the vulnerability of *trust*; with the necessary efforts of making himself known to her in return; with the possibility of failure due to conflicting desires, hopes, and fears; the risk of alienation and disappointment, etc. In short, it is her individuality, the very *condition* making her a *possible* candidate for love, which he finds unendurable.

[467] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 389.
[468] Cavell, "Introduction," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 7.
[469] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 491.

> Othello's jealousy itself is an unstable, turned concept. He seeks a possession that is not in opposition to another's claim or desire but one that establishes an absolute or inalienable bonding to himself, to which no claim or desire *could* be opposed, could conceivably count; as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him. It is against the (fantasied) possibility of overcoming this hyperbolic separateness that the skeptic's (disappointed, intellectualized, impossible, imperative, hyperbolic) demand makes sense.[470]

For the other-minds skeptic the very *conditions* of intimacy – which make intimacy possible at all (our bodily being which allows for physical contact, our language allowing for verbal communication) – appear as *boundaries* and limitations to full-blown intimacy. It is through the fantasy of having "immediate" and "complete" access to the other's thoughts, feelings, and sensations, analogous to the access (I imagine) I have to my own, that the other-minds skeptic's doubt appears to make sense. It is the fantasy of eliminating the very *possibility* of deceit and misunderstanding that turns our ordinary means of understanding others into veils, barriers, gaps, etc. In the light of this fantasy the expressiveness of others is read *as* a deceptive appearance.

The only way to *finally* end the possibility of deception for Othello is to kill the woman whose mind he cannot feel certain to have fully and finally penetrated. It is only by finally erasing that mind that it can never close itself to him. Only by "giv[ing] her a stone heart for her stone body," as Cavell writes, can it *never* betray him.[471] The other is turned into a *dead object*: "A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not."[472]

It is in light of the other-minds skeptic's refusal to read the expressiveness of the other's inner life and intentionality, of his or her tendency to turn the other into an *object*, that I think we should view Cavell's critique of Beardsley and Wimsatt. According to Cavell, Beardsley and Wimsatt do not only present us with "a bad picture of intention" but also "a bad picture of what a poem is. It is the picture of a poem as more or less like a physical object."[473] The thought that the combination of these two charges leveled against Beardsley and Wimsatt is what links anti-intentionalism to other-minds skepticism is furthermore reinforced when Cavell says the following: "The category of intention is as inescapable (or escapable with the same consequences) in speaking of objects of art as in speaking of what human beings say and do: without it, we would not understand what they are."[474] When reading this passage we should see its resemblance to the following segment

[470] Cavell, "Introduction," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 9.
[471] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 492.
[472] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 496.
[473] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 227.
[474] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 198.

from part four of *The Claim of Reason* where Cavell discusses other-minds skepticism:

> But there is a question whether, from time to time, we know what a piece of behavior means. Not merely in the sense that this piece of behavior is, say, a wince, but that this wince is of suffering, means suffering. Whether, so to speak, we take in the fact that behavior gives (as words do) expression; whether we take in the fact that criteria are expressions […]. Not to know this would be the same as not knowing what a body is.[475]

When the other-minds skeptic rejects a best case of knowing the other, say a best case of knowing that the other is in *pain*, the skeptic is denying the expressiveness of the body and simultaneously our concept of "body," since part of the grammar of "body" is that bodies, like words, are expressive of "the inner." The consequence of such a rejection is no longer to know what a body is. Likewise, Cavell suggests, the consequence of denying the category of authorial intention while speaking of art is no longer to know what art is. Part of the grammar of art is thereby made inaccessible. The problem is that in both cases, the skeptic misunderstands his or her self-inflicted confusion as constituting a skeptical revelation. The skeptic's rejection of the grammar is taken as the skeptical discovery of an area of inaccessible knowledge: that we can never know what goes on "inside" the mind of others or authors.

In "The Intentional Fallacy" Beardsley and Wimsatt writes: "'Intention,' as we shall use the term, corresponds to *what he intended* in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance. […] Intention is design or plan in the author's mind."[476] Intentions are, according to Beardsley and Wimsatt, *in* the mind while artworks, like poems, are clearly *outside* the author's mind. This results in what they take to be the inaccessibility and irrelevance of authorial intentions with regard to the literary work:

> One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.[477]

According to Wimsatt and Beardsley there are three types of data or "evidence" that the interpreter can consult in trying to establish the meaning of a poem. First there is "internal evidence." Internal evidence is public and consists in, besides the poem itself and its specific words and structure, general knowledge about the language and of relevant literary and cultural traditions,

[475] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 340.
[476] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 4.
[477] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 4.

genres and conventions. Second there is "external evidence" which Beardsley and Wimsatt consider to be "private or idiosyncratic" and not "part of the work as a linguistic fact."[478] External evidence comprises of such material as letters, journals, diaries, reported conversations, etc., in which the author expresses "how or why the poet wrote the poem – to what lady, while sitting on what lawn, or at the death of what friend or brother."[479] External evidence is in their view not really evidence at all. It does not help one to establish what the poem means. Or if it is to be taken as evidence for something then it would only constitute evidence of the *authorial meaning*, and would not touch upon the *textual meaning*. According to Beardsley, one can seldom know the authorial meaning, *independently* of the poem since, many authors of poems have not left such self-interpretations (and many are unavailable for asking, might be dead, unwilling to, etc.). But if they have left us such comments, all we can do with them is to get support for inferences about the poems *authorial meaning*, not its textual meaning.[480]

Finally there is a third, intermediate, kind of evidence they consider "semiprivate." It concerns information about the character and biography of the author, as well as specific meanings he or she – or the coterie to which he or she belongs – associates with certain words or topics. Such intermediate evidence can occasionally be of interest since "meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for *him*, are part of the word's history and meaning."[481]

One way to criticize Wimsatt and Beardsley would be to point out that there seems to be no strict and reliable boundary between what they call, on the one hand, "internal" and "intermediate" evidence, and between "intermediate" and "external" evidence on the other. When do "semiprivate" meanings of a "coterie" turn into something more public, say, like the self-understanding of a literary movement? What about aesthetic manifestos – should surrealist poems be read in light of the intentions expressed and shared by surrealist authors? Does it or does it not constitute something internal to the poetry? But if the self-understanding of a coterie could occasionally be considered to qualify as public evidence, why cannot the self-understanding of a single author count too? Is the public nature of the evidence established merely by the *number* of its "authors"?

Cavell, however, takes a slightly different route in his criticism. Instead of attacking what should *count* as evidence of meaning, he challenges what any claim to "evidence" is supposed to be evidence *for*. In "The Avoidance of Love," he writes:

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[478] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 10.
[479] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 10.
[480] Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism*, p. 33.
[481] Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 10.

> But it is then unclear what the words are to be used as evidence for. For a correct interpretation? But what would an interpretation then be of? It often emerges that the evidence provided by the words is to support something called the symbolic structure or the pattern of something or other in the piece. But such concepts are bits of further theories which escape any support the mere presence of words can provide. Moreover, there is more than one procedure which could count as "attending to words themselves." (Just as there is more than one way of expressing "faithfulness to a text.") The New Critics encouraged attention to the ambiguities, patternings, tensions of words; the picture is of a (more or less hidden) structure of which the individual words are parts. Another mode of attention to the particular words themselves is directed to the voice which says them, and through that to the phenomenology of the straits of mind in which only those words said in that order will suffice.[482]

Here I think one can see that for "the words themselves" to work as *a contrast* to what an author *meant* by those words, in the way Beardsley intends the contrast to work, one must already have accepted Beardsley's theory which *establishes* and defines this distinction in the first place.[483] In that sense Beardsley's argument is completely circular. It is only if we *already* understand "faithfulness to the text" as meaning "not asking what the author meant with the text," that asking what the author meant *while* attending to the words themselves (in the text) will seem like going "outside" the text for evidence of its meaning. These very words – "the words themselves" – do not in and of *themselves* predispose us to uphold Beardsley's particular distinction when we use the phrase in our everyday practice of criticism. The expression "the words themselves" can just as well be used to denote evidence for what the author *does* or *did* mean in the text, such as when we have the following kind of conflict: "I didn't *mean* that!" "Well, you *said* exactly *that*!" So it is not clear solely on account of an appeal to "the words themselves" what the words, as Cavell says, are supposed to be evidence *for*, what the interpretation is an interpretation *of*. "The words themselves" could equally be taken as evidence of a meaning independent of what the author meant as well as, precisely, what the author intended them to mean.

Another thing to make one suspicious that some form of skepticism is present here is the very *terms* Cavell uses in his critique, as can be seen in the following quote from "Music Discomposed":

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[482] Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 40.

[483] However, what Cavell is actually discussing in this passage is the contrast between "the words themselves" on the one hand, and the character speaking them *in* the play, on the other. Nonetheless, I think his point works equally well on the contrast between what "the words mean" and "what the author means." Antony J. Cascardi mentions how Cavell's effort to "bring the characters of the play and their words back together so that we could once again see their dilemmas of denial and avoidance, acknowledgement and refusal, as making claims on us" in his reading of *King Lear,* is at the same time a critique of, and response to, the idiom of New Criticism. See Antony J. Cascardi, "Cavell and Kant: The Works of Criticism and the Work of Art," p. 49.

> The denial of the relevance of the artist's intention is likely not to record the simple, fundamental fact that what an artist meant cannot alter what he has or has not accomplished, but imply a philosophical *theory* according to which the artist's intention is something in his mind while the work of art is something out of his mind, and so the closest connection there could be between them is one of causation, about which, to be sure, only a psychologist or biographer could care.[484]

Merely the words "theory" and "denial" should heighten our suspicion here. These terms of critique are recognizable from Cavell's other investigations into skepticism. According to Cavell, anti-intentionalism constitutes a philosophical theory *denying* the relevance of the artist's intentions as these intentions are construed as something contained or hidden "in his mind." This is nothing other than a critique of literary other-minds skepticism.[485]

What an anti-intentionalist like Beardsley would probably reply here is that we are ignoring the fact that we are talking about *literature*, and not about ordinary interpersonal conversations; not everything which applies to ordinary conversations and interactions will have applicability within the field of literary interpretation. This is of course true. But then, it is also a fact that in interpretations of literature we *do* ask questions that in various ways make the intentions of the author relevant. This remains part of the ordinary procedures of interpretive conduct that relate to the study of literature as well.

> Nothing could be commoner among critics of art than to ask *why* the thing is at it is, and characteristically to put this question, for example, in the form "Why does Shakespeare follow the murder of Duncan with a scene which begins with the sound of knocking?", or "Why does Beethoven put in a bar of rest in the last line of the fourth Bagatelle (Op. 126)?" The best critic is the one who knows best where to ask this question, and how to get an answer. […] The philosopher may, because of his theory, explain that such questions are misleadingly phrased, and that they really refer to the object itself, not to Shakespeare or Beethoven. But who is misled, and about what? An alternative procedure, and I think sounder, would be to accept the critic's question as perfectly appropriate – as, so to speak, a philosophical datum – and then to look for a philosophical explanation which can accommodate that fact.[486]

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[484] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 182.

[485] While Rudrum is not really describing this in terms of skepticism, I find his following comparison between New Critics and analytic philosophers to speak well to the skeptical problematic I discuss here: "both New Critics and analytic philosophers are too frequently given to studying the words in terms of appeals to form and structure, and although these terms mean completely different things in these disciplines – logical form and propositional structure in the case of analytical philosophy; literary, poetic, and symbolic structures and forms in the case of New Criticism – both tend to substitute theoretical entities for a more frank engagement with what particular human beings in particular circumstances say and mean by particular words." Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 67.

[486] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 182. We should keep in mind, though, that Cavell also adds: "Of course, not just *any* critic's response can be so taken. And this suggests a further

There are two things from this quote to which I shall pay particular attention: first the significance of the question "Why?" in this context, and secondly what is it about our *common* sayings in criticism that make them relevant as a philosophical datum.

As is the case in other passages of both "Music Discomposed" and "A Matter of Meaning It," Cavell is in the above quote alluding to G.E.M. Anscombe's *Intention* (1957).[487] In *Intention*, Anscombe analyses intentional action, intention in acting and expressions of intention. It is significant for the grammar of "intentional action," Anscombe writes, that "a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting."[488] What Anscombe shows in her book is, among other things, that intentional action is the kind of action about which it makes sense to ask *why* it was done – and in asking "Why?" one is then asking for a *reason* (why it was done). This is an essential part of the grammar of "intentional action": it is integral to us knowing what kind of "thing" an intentional action is. "Reasons" are in turn a category through which intentional actions are made intelligible to us. In contrast, we cannot meaningfully ask *why* some dead mechanism is doing what it is doing and thereby ask for a *reason* (if we do not think *someone* – perhaps an engineer, or a ghost, or God has a *reason* for *intentionally* moving it). When we ask *why* something mechanical moves, we are seeking *causes*. But that logic works the other way around too: when we ask for (mechanical, biological, unconscious psychological) *causes* for a physical movement – say the physical movement of an arm – we are not treating that movement or behavior as an *intentional* action. (Perhaps it was a reflex, some tick, the result of repressed anger, or a strong gust of wind, which moved the arm.) However, without the understanding of intentional action, and the category of "reasons" why people do things, we would not be able to understand people as *doing* things at all. And were we unable to understand people as doing determinate things, could we even claim to know what people are?

By alluding to Anscombe's special sense of "Why?", Cavell is here linking poetry to intentional action: "A poem, whatever else it is, is an *utterance* (outer-ance). It is as true to say of poems that they are physical objects as to say of human actions that they are physical motions (though it is perfectly true that there would not be an action unless somebody moved, did some-

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methodological principle in philosophizing about art. It seems obvious enough that in setting out to speak about the arts one begins with a rough canon of the objects to be spoken about. It seems to me equally necessary, in appealing to the criticism of art for philosophical data, that one begin with a rough canon of criticism which is not then repudiated in the philosophy to follow." Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p.182. We cannot use critical claims of the sort that most find highly dubious as "data" but more central and canonized procedures – and of course – which critics and which procedures that should count as such could be a matter of dispute.

[487] He is making a direct reference to this book in "A Matter of Meaning It," footnote 7, p. 235.

[488] G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (1957) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), §5, p. 9.

thing.)"[489] On Beardsley's and Wimsatt's account, poems are more or less *objects* and intentions are at best *causes* that lurk behind the work. But this is a bad rendering of both poems and intentions, Cavell says, because what this account forgets or obscures is that poems are the results and embodiments of intentional action, and intentional actions are such things of which we can (logically) ask *why* they were done – and why they were done in a certain way. In asking these questions we invariably go searching for (intentional) reasons. The grammar of intentions are misconstrued if they are couched in terms of *causes*: "Intention is no more an efficient cause of an object of art than it is of human action; in both cases it is a way of understanding the thing done, of describing what happens."[490] Remove intentionality from poems and we would know as little of what they are as we would of human action without the category of intentionality.[491]

Let me now turn to the second point: Cavell said that "Nothing could be commoner among critics of art than to ask *why* the thing is as it is" – but what is the significance of stressing how we *commonly* ask such questions when we investigate what *should* count as "evidence" in interpretation? What sort of authority might the various ways in which we *do* criticism have in establishing how our interpretive argumentation *ought* to get done? Once more one comes back to the question of how, and with what kind of authority, it can be claimed that something or other legitimately works as a datum, that is, as evidence for an interpretive statement. It is striking to note the difference in the kind of authority to which Beardsley and Cavell appeal while clarifying this. For Beardsley, as one can recall, the authority ultimately resides in theory. The claim that authorial intention is irrelevant and inaccessible in poetry rests on his theoretical description of the poem as a literary and aesthetic *object*. One should also recall that when, in *The Possibility of Criticism*, Beardsley posed what he himself considered to be transcendental questions about the conditions of possibility for interpretation, these questions were fused with the project of establishing and proving that valid interpretation *is* possible.[492] The authority has its origins in theory and trickles down to consequences in practice. This, I argued, drove Beardsley into a Kantian skeptical problematic about the criteria of interpretation. Cavell's philosophical procedure, however, is quite the reverse: it begins in practice

[489] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 228.
[490] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 230.
[491] I agree with Stephen Mulhall when he writes: "Some critics reject critical references to the artist's intentions because they picture an intention as existing in the artist's head and having only a causal relation to the artwork; they thereby fail to see that intention and outcome are internally related […]. Invoking intentions does not therefore drive us outside the artwork, but further into it […]. [A] refusal to relate to artworks in these terms would amount to a refusal to relate to them as works of art." Mulhall, "Introduction," *The Cavell Reader*, p. 17. He makes similar points in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary*, pp. 190–195.
[492] See Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism,* pp. 9–10, p. 47.

and moves up to theory. Its philosophical investigation leaves, to speak with Wittgenstein, "everything as it is"; it does not treat critical questions and practices as things that need to be regularized or founded by philosophy, but as "philosophical data" which a philosophical account then can try to explain or clarify.

Cavell is here distinctly linking the kind of authority we have in knowing the criteria of valid interpretation to the kind of authority we have in knowing words in general (i.e. in having a language) – and thus to the kind of authority a philosophy, which appeals to ordinary language, can possess. In "The Avoidance of Love," Cavell writes:

> It is a matter of learning what it is one uses as data for one's assertions about such works, what kinds of appeal one in fact finds convincing. I should like to add that identical problems arise in considering the phenomenon of ordinary language philosophy: There the problem is also raised of determining the data from which philosophy proceeds and to which it appeals.[493]

So how does one learn what data counts and what data that are convincing in interpretations? Well, here I would say that one learns such things first through interpretive *practice*: one learns it by reading and interpreting literature and by reading both good and bad interpretations of that literature; by participating in interpretive discussions and debates; through the process of trying to voice arguments why *this* constitutes an interpretive flaw – that *here* someone has missed a crucial point, why *that* argument is incoherent or fails to account for an essential feature of the work, etc. One gains in interpretive proficiency when expressing why *this* interpretation works better than that, how *that* interpretation really captures the central theme of a work, etc.; one learns these things when others point out what works and does not work in one's own interpretation, etc., etc. This is how the criteria of valid interpretation is learnt. And it is a *fact* of this practice that interpretive questions which concern authorial intentions are (at least occasionally) asked, they can even be central to certain forms of interpretation.[494]

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[493] Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," *Disowning Knowledge*, pp. 41–42.

[494] It is in this practical light I think one should understand Cavell's reflections about the critic's competence in relation to the competence of the aesthetician philosophizing about the arts: "only someone competent as a critic of art is competent to speak of art at all, at least from the point of view of the experience which goes into it or which is to be found in it, so that an aesthetician incapable of producing criticism is simply incapable of recognizing and relevantly describing the objects of his discourse." Cavell, "Music Discomposed," pp. 180–181. I do not think we should read this as saying that only a *professional* critic, with professional, expert authority, is competent to talk about art. Rather the point is that the authority a *real* critic commands is grounded in his or her capacity to competently speak about art – a competence that people other than professional critics can clearly have as well but that not all competent language users share. However, since this is the "ordinary" knowledge we have of art, or the ordinary way in which such knowledge is expressed, an aesthetician trying to philosophize on this phenomenon must have this competence/this knowledge too. Otherwise he

However, while Cavell's appeals to interpretive practice are supposed to help us solve (or dissolve) certain theoretical problems, Cavell also makes plain that these facts of criticism are *no more* than facts. That they are no more than facts can in turn lead the philosopher of interpretation into what I think one should see as clearly skeptical temptations:

> The philosopher, hearing such claims and descriptions, has his ancient choice: he can repudiate them, on the ground that they *cannot* be true (because of his philosophical theory – in this case of what poems are and what intentions are and what criticism is); or he can accept them as data for his philosophical investigation, learning from them what it is his philosophizing must account for. Beardsley's procedure is the former, mine the latter. According to Beardsley's, when a critic inquires about intention, seriousness, sincerity, etc., he is forced outside the work. My point is that he finds this true because of his idea of where an intention is to be searched for, and because he has been reading unhelpful critics. For the *fact* is that the correct sense of the question "Why?" directs you further *into* the work. In saying that this, if true, is a fact, I mean to be saying that it is no more than a fact; it is not an *account* of objects of art, and intention, and criticism, which shows the role of this fact in our dealings with art.[495]

But what, someone could ask, gives Cavell's claim – that it is a *fact* that the "correct" sense of "Why?" directs you further into the work – any more authority than Beardsley's opposing claim that it leads us away from the work? Well, in a certain sense, nothing. Cavell does not take himself to have (principally) any more authority than Beardsley on this matter and that is part of what constitutes the difference in their appeals to authority.

> Have my claims about the artist and his audience been based on hearsay, or real evidence, or really upon the work itself? But now the "work itself" becomes a heightened philosophical concept, not a neutral description. My claims do not rest upon works of art themselves, apart from the relations to how such works are made and the reasons for which they are made, and considering that some are sincere and some counterfeit…. But my claim is that to know such things is to know what a work of art is – they are, if one may say so, parts of its grammar. And, of course, I may be taken in.[496]

While Beardsley claims to know the true "account of objects of art, and intention, and criticism" by means of a theory – thereby reaching for a more fundamental or superior *expert* authority – Cavell claims not to know anything more about the criteria of interpretive validity than Beardsley. In "Knowing and Acknowledging" Cavell writes: "the authority, of appeals to

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or she would be as incompetent as someone trying to philosophize on furniture but could not describe the difference between a chair and a table. And "knowing" here would require practical familiarity with criticism, as of the kind I tried to describe above.

[495] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 227.

[496] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 212.

what we should ordinarily say, *as philosophical data*, depends upon their being met in independence of any particular philosophical position or theory."[497] This means, I claim, that, given the similarity between the problem of establishing what counts as philosophical and critical data, Cavell ends up asserting that Beardsley actually knows what he knows too. Beardsley *knows* that the correct sense of "Why?" leads you further into the work because Beardsley is just as authoritative as Cavell in eliciting the grammatical criteria that (in fact) are at work in interpretation. This in turn means that when Beardsley "repudiates" these facts, "on the ground that they cannot be true because of his philosophical theory," Beardsley is thereby *denying* something he knows. He is refusing to acknowledge something he knows – namely a certain part of the criteria of interpretation. But *why*? Why would he want to do that? If anything, what Beardsley really wants in interpretation is to establish *true knowledge* – why would he then deny a knowledge he is already in possession of? Well why would Othello strangle the woman he knew loved him and knew was faithful to him on the pretext that he did not know? Can it be that in both cases the conditions of this knowledge seem to stand in the way of *certainty*?

One further thing to be alert to while pondering this question is Cavell's remark that while it *is* a fact that we do ask questions about the author and his intentions in criticism – this fact is still *nothing more* than a fact. I take the significance of this to be twofold. First, since Beardsley is just as authoritative as Cavell in eliciting the criteria of interpretation, Cavell cannot *prove* anything with these facts; the facts of interpretive practice cannot by themselves force Beardsley to accept the legitimacy of that interpretive practice. *How* these facts should be viewed, what they are taken to *show*, is still up to Beardsley to judge for himself. The philosopher has, as Cavell writes, his "ancient choice" either to acknowledge or repudiate these facts as validly expressing our interpretive criteria and grammar. The appeal to common criteria – that is, any appeal to what we as interpreters know of interpretations and intentions, what we do with them and say about them – cannot be used to disprove the interpretive other-minds skeptic head on.

Secondly, Cavell's appeal to *facts* – and this I read as meaning: empirical, *historical* facts, facts about a culturally situated practice – also indicates that these things (as empirical and historical) are subject to *change*. In appealing to these facts Cavell is appealing to something *contingent on* the practice of criticism, in contrast to Beardsley who is appealing to a theoretical, presumably stable, definition which should help to regulate the practice of criticism. This is relevant, since another *fact* is that interpretive practices as well as literature (and their criteria) *change*. The implication here is that Cavell's appeals to what we know will not provide us with *a priori rules* for how to treat and understand future difficult cases – and perhaps this is why Beards-

[497] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," p. 238.

ley would be tempted to deny the relevance of authorial intentions in interpretation.

In chapter 4 I noted the ambivalence within New Criticism regarding whether criticism should be "scientific" or not. On the one hand, one can clearly see a wish among New Critics to free poetry and criticism from undue comparison and competition with the sciences. On the other hand, one can also index a certain amount of attraction to the hard sciences; the New Critics were after all driven by an ambition to make criticism a more intellectually regulated and academic enterprise. In the case of Beardsley and Wimsatt's anti-intentionalism I think the intellectual inheritance from I.A. Richards – and through him, the logical positivists – may have played a role when intentions were rendered mystical, private, and unreachable. Interestingly, Cavell expresses a similar suspicion. In "A Matter of Meaning It," he writes:

> It is one irony of recent literary history that the New Criticism, with one motive fixed on preserving poetry from what it felt as the encroachment of science and logical positivism (repeating as an academic farce what the nineteenth century went through as a cultural tragedy), accepted undemurringly a view of intention established, or pictured, in that same philosophy – according to which an intention is some internal, prior mental event causally connected with outwards effects, which remain the sole evidence for its having occurred.[498]

So why did Beardsley and Wimsatt deny the relevance of authorial intention? Well, from a position interior to one of the philosophical contexts that New Criticism developed out of – I.A. Richard's close connection to the logical positivists is of particular importance here – appeals to intentions must have seemed uncertain, subjective, and anathema to the task of establishing the coveted standard of objective interpretive validity. As is the case with other-minds skeptics more generally, a gap is posited between the "inner" and the "outer." In "traditional" other-minds skepticism this gap separates out the "inner" content of the mind (intentions, feelings, sensations, thoughts, etc.) from the "outer" behavior of the body; in Beardsley's and Wimsatt's case the gap comes to divide the "inner" intentions of the author and the "outer" meaning of the literary object.

What Beardsley could have done instead – and what in fact New Criticism did achieve – was to *change* part of the criteria of interpretation. New Criticism *invented* a new form of reading – close reading – and that reading was indeed a reaction against biographical and intentionalist criticism. But its legitimate acceptance as an interpretive genre, I claim, did not stem from a new theoretical analysis of what truly constitutes the essence of poetry – but rather from the fact that it worked. The academic interpretive practice

[498] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 226.

acknowledged close reading as constituting a legitimate, workable, reading practice – and thereby the criteria of academic interpretive validity changed. I think one should also have this in mind when Cavell says that it is no more than a fact that a certain sense of the question "Why?" brings you further into the poem. That this *is* a fact, hinges on us sharing criteria (about what counts as going "further into" the poem) that accommodate intentionalist readings. And we *do*. Nonetheless, New Criticism has shown us that there can be something else that counts as "going further into the poem," a kind of interpretation which does not proceed by asking that, otherwise very important, question "Why?" but which abstains from asking it in its intentionalist or biographical form.

5.3. Cavell on Overinterpretation and the Logic of Interpretive Conflicts

At this point one might be under the impression that since Cavell rejects anti-intenionalism he is instead siding with the "intentionalists" in the debate between anti-intentionalism and intentionalism. But this would be, I think, to misunderstand what Cavell means when he says that in our understanding of art the category of intention is inescapable. Cavell does not claim that valid interpretations *must* be interpretations that aim at reconstructing the intentions of the author; he is not Hirsch or Juhl – or Jerrold Levinson or Noël Carroll, whose more modern forms of intentionalism do not carry with them the same problematical conception of "intention" as Beardsley's or Hirsch's.[499] Even if one acknowledges that without the concept of intention we would neither know what action nor art is, this does not mean that whenever we focus on actions or art we always hone in on the *intentions* by which these were done, as if those intentions are always relevant. Cavell is certainly not saying that we *must* do that in order to secure interpretive validity. In fact, Cavell is not presenting *any* theory that tries once and for all to state the criteria of validity in interpretation.

But neither does this mean that Cavell "bans" theorizing about interpretation nor does he think that theorization is never called for. In Cavell one finds theorizing about interpretation too, but this theorizing has a different structure and aim when compared to Beardsley's. Some of these pieces also speak to the problems Beardsley's theory was meant to address, and of special interest here are some of Cavell's comments on the status and validity of logically incompatible interpretations, and on the anxiety over how to separate valid interpretations from overinterpretations. I think Cavell has productive ways to philosophize on what it is to *mis*interpret and *over*interpret –

[499] See for instance Levinson's defense of hypothetical intentionalism and Carroll's defense of actual intentionalism in *Is There a Single Right Interpretation,* pp. 309–318, 319–344.

problems which usually fuel the interpretive skepticism of the Cartesian variety in the first place. In this third part of the chapter I will show how Cavell can help us find alternative procedures of philosophizing on these issues, alternatives that successfully avoid the skeptical pitfalls we noted in Beardsley.

In the introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness* Cavell writes that "[t]wo worries […] are generally expressed concerning critical objectivity: that a critic is reading something into a text; and that there may be more than one interpretation of a text."[500] The worry about reading *into* is the worry of over-interpretation, and the worry about how to combine plurality with validity is basically the problem of how we should understand interpretive *conflicts* when two opposing interpretations both seem equally supported by the text.

Let me start with the second of these problems. In chapter 1, I cited already how Cavell links the logic of interpretation to the logic of aspect-seeing. To interpret is to see something *as* something. This also means that for something to be an interpretation *at all*, there must (principally) be space for alternative ways of "seeing as" than the one a particular interpretation proposes: "for something to be correctly regarded as an interpretation […] there must be conceived to be competing interpretations possible, where 'must' is a term not of etiquette but of (what Wittgenstein calls) grammar, something like logic."[501] This does not, however, imply that all alternatives are of equal standing. Nonetheless, occasionally that is precisely the situation – where two interpretations seem equally supported by the text and yet cannot be combined: they create an interpretive conflict.

This is where a specific puzzlement can present itself if we do not share Beardsley's realistic monism. For how should we understand and account for this sense of *conflict* – which is intractable and which must be acknowledged – if we do not necessarily see the conflict as being about competing claims about a single truth? Here one can easily feel that *either* we must let go of this sense of conflict: there can be no *real* conflict at work even if the interpretive claims are contradicting each other. But this would make interpretive *debates* and arguments a curious and seemingly frivolous thing. *Or* we should admit that the singularist is right: if one interpretation holds then the other must be false.

Here the comparison with aspect-seeing and aspect-changes is helpful because with it we can see that the logic of *conflict* and *mutual exclusion* can be cashed out in another way than in terms of truth and falsity. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell writes: "since one interpretation eclipses another it may present itself as *denying* the possibility of that other."[502] This is a brief but potent remark because it helps us see how there can be a genuine conflict

[500] Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 35.
[501] Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 36.
[502] Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 37.

between two mutually exclusive interpretive claims that nonetheless does not entail singularism. One interpretation indeed *blocks the other out* – as long as we stay with it. But to admit this, that one interpretation can *eclipse* the other, does not mean that one interpretation denies the *possibility* of the other. The only thing the presently held interpretation denies is the other's *actuality*. Both can be valid, both are possible, but they cannot be held in one's mind at the same time, just as we cannot see the rabbit as long as we are seeing the duck in the duck-rabbit and vice versa.[503] Seeing the duck does not obliterate the possibility of seeing the rabbit or the validity of doing so. The logic of aspect-seeing would clearly get misconstrued if the duck (or the rabbit) were to be viewed as the single-right interpretation, the *true* interpretation, of the gestalt-figure.

Secondly, in turning to the problem of the limits of validity and the problem of how to avoid *overinterpretation*, I would also like to comment on a work by Colin Davis that approaches this problematic with reference to Cavell as well. I think I share with Davis the contention – and I take it we are of the same opinion this is Cavell's contention too – that we cannot state in advance, and in general, the criteria of interpretive validity. This, however, does not place me alongside Davis when it comes to his celebration of "overinterpretation." In *Critical Excess* (2010) Davis not only defends or champions what he calls "overreading," he furthermore cites Cavell as one such exemplary overreader. Davis thus seems to suggest that Cavell would not consider the distinction between valid interpretation and overinterpretation as being either real or meaningful. In chapter 6 of Davis' book, entitled "Cavell and the Claim of Reading," he writes:

> I want to underline Cavell's description of his readings as "experimentation" and his readiness to entertain what might seem outrageous or willfully odd. […] Cavell's project entails a staunch and explicit defence of overreading. We cannot know in advance what power of discovery may be unleashed by our preposterous-seeming interpretations, so we might as well try them out to see where it leaves us. The introduction to *Pursuits of Happiness* gives the best defense I know of overinterpretation. Cavell is not overly concerned, at least as a starting point, about the danger of "reading in," that is, finding in a text something that is not actually there, or more than is verifiably there.[504]

I will return to my alternative understanding of Cavell's defense of his "experimental reading" and of the passage in *Pursuit of Happiness*, to which Davis refers in support of his reading, shortly. But first let me briefly clarify what Davis means by overreading and why he thinks we should embrace what he calls "the hermeneutics of overreading."

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[503] Torsten Pettersson makes a similar point in "The Literary Work as a Pliable Entity: Combining Realism and Pluralism," pp. 211–230.
[504] Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 139–140.

In *Critical Excess*, Davis revisits the debate between Eco, Rorty and Culler in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* – something that I also touched upon in chapter 1. What is of primary interest here is Davis's critique of Eco. Davis first summarizes Eco's view: "We may never know with absolute certainty that a given reading is correct, but we can be pretty sure that some are wrong."[505] To Davis this sounds "reasonable enough. Perhaps even a little too reasonable, and in any case it is not clear how far it actually helps us in assessing the plausibility of competing readings."[506] A major fault Davis finds in Eco is thus that Eco does not give us a very "useful" criterion or tool by which we can assess interpretations. Commenting on Eco's discussion of the so-called intention of the text, he goes on to write:

> Giving the *intention operis* a Latin name might endow it with an element of intellectual glamour, but its usefulness is limited. It is not clear, for example, that it represents an advance on Wimsatt and Beardsley's account of meaning is to be established by close reading of the literary work rather than by appealing to authorial intention. The strategic point of Eco's notion is to support his claim that the rights of interpreters have been overstressed by providing what he calls a "parameter" (Eco 1992: 141) for acceptable interpretations. This does not in itself solve the problem of how to tell a good interpretation from a bad one.[507]

I agree with Davis that Eco's "parameter for acceptable interpretations" does not work very well. And I think Davis may be correct in linking Eco's effort, in this respect, to the theoretical attempts of Beardsley and Wimsatt. To the extent that both Eco and Beardsley are trying to establish a general positive criterion by which we can separate a valid interpretation from an invalid one, I think both of them are misguided. However, Davis and I part ways when it comes to the moral we are prepared to draw from all this, and what we think it says about the distinction between interpretation and overinterpretation itself. Faced with this "failure" Davis seems to propose that we give up the distinction between interpretation and overinterpretation and embrace overreading. With this injunction, Davis resembles both Fish and Rorty: since we cannot have a theory which clearly and in advance sorts interpretations into "good" and "bad," the categories seem empty and meaningless, so we might as well just learn to love the "bad" ones – the overinterpretations.

But this is not the moral I draw, nor the one I think Cavell is drawing. For Davis, this lack of positive criteria constitutes something like a *failure*. However, this will only strike one as a failure if one thinks that stating positive criteria is something we *should* in principle be able to do if the distinction itself is to be valid and substantial. I do not think we can, or should try to, give any theoretical definition of interpretive validity which in "itself

[505] Davis, *Critical Excess,* p. 168.
[506] Davis, *Critical Excess*, pp. 168–169.
[507] Davis, *Critical Excess*, p. 168.

[would] solve the problem of how to tell a good interpretation from a bad one." Instead, I think we have here, once more, an instance of a conflict between an interpretive Cartesian skeptic and the interpretive Cartesian epistemologist in which both sides are in fact skeptical. It is part of the skeptical misunderstanding to believe that we *need* to define the general criteria of validity *in order to* secure the meaningfulness of the categories "valid interpretation" and invalid "overinterpretation." If Beardsley and Eco are here the skeptical twins, trying to establish the criteria of validity in interpretation in order to secure the practice of valid interpretation, Davis becomes a straightforward interpretive skeptic. The irony of it all is that Davis actually cites *Cavell* in defense of his own interpretive skepticism.

That is not something I think Davis can legitimately do. Cavell does not fit the role of an exemplar "overreader." If one looks at one of the most central passages that Davis cites, from *Pursuit of Happiness*, I would advise a quite different, in principle opposite, reading of it. Cavell writes:

> Naturally I do not deny that some readings are irresponsible in fairly straightforward ways. But "reading in," as a term of criticism, suggests something quite particular, like going too far even if on a real track. Then the question would be, as the question often is about philosophy, how to bring reading to an end. And this should be seen as a problem internal to criticism, not a criticism of it from outside. In my experience people worried about reading in, or overinterpretation, or going too far, are, or were, typically afraid of getting started, of reading as such, as if afraid that texts – like people, like time and places – mean things and moreover mean more than you know. This is accordingly a fear of something real, and it may be a healthy fear, that is, a fear of something fearful. […] Still, my experience is that most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread. And the moral I urge is that this assessment be made the subject of arguments about particular texts.[508]

In this quote Cavell indeed expresses the view that rather than texts generally being irresponsibly overread, or overinterpreted, they tend to be underread. He furthermore says that this is due to an exaggerated fear of overinterpretation, which in turn can point to a fear of reading as such, a fear of the conditions of reading, an anxiety over even starting to read. When Cavell then compares this fear of reading, and of not being able to stop at the proper juncture (the fear of going too far), with the problem in philosophy of bringing philosophy to an end, I think the comparison hints at further similarities.[509] I think one can here also trace an analogy between a possible *but*

[508] Cavell, "Introduction," *The Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 35. Also quoted in Davis, *Critical Excess*, p. 140.

[509] Cavell is here alluding to §133 in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, which reads: "It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one

unnecessarily petrifying fear of overinterpretation of literature, and a possible *but unnecessarily petrifying* fear of nonsense in philosophy – perhaps not least in philosophy following Wittgenstein.

In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein says: "Don't *for heaven's sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don't fail to pay attention to your nonsense."[510] Likewise I read Cavell as here advising us not to nip in the bud a possibly fruitful, but radical, reading, simply out of fear of ending up with an overinterpretation. This fear of going too far (even if on a real track) is probably particularly present in academic criticism. Cavell is then advising us still to dare to risk – we will only know if the reading holds if we follow it through. We should therefore allow ourselves to be experimental. By pointing out that this fear *can* be harmful and exaggerated, Cavell does *not* deny that the risk is any less real. Rather, the fear is a "fear of something real" and this anxiety might either be healthy or stupefying – both in philosophy and in literary interpretation – depending on the way it exhorts its power on the individual.

So while I think Davis is *right* when he says that we "cannot know in advance what power of discovery may be unleashed by our preposterous-seeming interpretations, so we might as well try them out to see where it leaves us" – and while I think he is correct too in attributing this view to Cavell – nonetheless I think Davis fails to see that experimenting with readings actually means (as it does also for Cavell) that we *can* end up with *either* interpretive validity or overinterpretation. Though validity should not be understood here in terms of "verification" and "certainty," as Davis' skeptical formulations suggest. Rather, what is at stake is whether we succeed in making sense of the text in a sustainable way. Our interpretive claims are claims to community, to shared intelligibility, and as such they are vulnerable to the repudiation or acknowledgement or of our fellow interpreters. Our preposterous-seeming interpretations may be acknowledged as not being preposterous after all – or they may not.

This brings me to another important remark made by Cavell in the above quoted passage, namely that "reading in," as Cavell writes, is a term of *criticism.* The way it is actually used in our interpretive practice is as a term of *critique*: a "good overinterpretation" is in this sense an oxymoron since the moment the interpretation, which *was* perceived as an *over*interpretation, becomes accepted it is considered to be an overinterpretation no longer.[511]

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that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. – Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. – Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem. There is not *a* philosophical method, though there indeed are methods, like different therapies." Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 133, p. 44e.

[510] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value.* p. 64e.

[511] Another and, I think, more fruitful way to champion what may appear to be overinterpretations, or excessive interpretations, particularly those which reject unity and wholeness as evident interpretive goals, is presented in Bogel's *New Formalist Criticism*. In chapter 4,

The problem of separating overinterpretations from valid ones is furthermore, as Cavell writes, something that "should be seen as a problem *internal to criticism*, not a criticism of it from *outside.*"[512] This means that, just as in philosophy, with regard to the fear of nonsense and the real risk of ending up in nonsense, the only way to detect it (nonsense or overinterpretation), is from *inside*. To try and state general criteria of validity (or the limits of sense) from the outside, from theory and in advance, as Beardsley tried to do, does not work. On the contrary, "the moral" Cavell urges us to draw here is that "this assessment" – the assessment of distinguishing between valid interpretation and invalid overinterpretation – "be made subject of *arguments about particular texts.*"[513] This is clearly not a rejection of the meaningfulness or usefulness of the distinction between valid and invalid interpretations. What Cavell says is instead that whether or not something *is* an overinterpretation, is *not* a question which can be settled on a general level, say, by stating a rule or by appealing to pre-assigned criteria which we then *use* while judging interpretations. Rather, this is a kind of question that has to be dealt with *piecemeal*. It cannot be assessed before (the fearful, risky) act of reading itself. It can only be assessed *through* reading – from the inside of reading – by looking at the *particular* interpretive claims and arguments made about *particular* texts. To single out the valid interpretations from the invalid, we have to, as Wittgenstein writes in §66 of *Philosophical Investigations*, "*look and see*." In each and every case.

5.4. Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have tried to show that Monroe C. Beardsley's theorizing on interpretation exemplifies interpretive skepticism. His skeptical commitments have mainly two forms: he is an interpretive epistemologist, i.e. a *skeptical twin*, about interpretation in general, and he is also a straightforward literary skeptic about other minds.

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entitled "Textual Infatuation, True Infatuation," Bogel argues for "a kind of reverse discrimination, a partiality to the partial, one aim of which is to dramatize the sort of attention, even raptness, that often animates formalist attention to minute textual particulars – to parts." Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism*, p. 164. Davis's hermeneutics of overreading also contests wholeness, unity, and coherence as obvious interpretive goals. See especially Davis, *Critical Excess*, pp.174–178. However, Bogel succeeds to keep the balance between acknowledging new kinds of interpretive goals and acknowledging the distinction between valid interpretation and invalid overinterpretation. While Bogel on the one hand is "skeptical" of the phrase "reading too much into the text" it is "not because I think overreading is impossible," he writes. See Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism*, p. 165.

[512] My italics. Cavell also writes: "Reading in, therefore, going too far, is a risk inherent in the business of reading, and venial in comparison with not going far enough, not reaching the end; indeed it may be essential to knowing what the end is." Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 37.

[513] My italics.

As a skeptical twin, Beardsley follows the tradition from Schleiermacher's hermeneutical theory to the extent that he tries to state the criteria of interpretive validity in advance in order to create a *method* for correct interpretation. As an interpretive realist his understanding of the skeptical threat against interpretation is predominantly of the *Cartesian variety*. This threat charges the critic with *not knowing* which interpretation is the valid one and which is not, and with not knowing whether this distinction holds at all. This problematic is usually spurred by the encounter with either an interpretive *hard case*, an interpretive *conflict* (between logically incompatible interpretations), or an instance of possible *overinterpretation*. Regarding all these problems – problems I regard as inherent to interpretive practice – Beardsley's theorizing constitutes an *avoidance* of the problematic through an escape to theory. This also means that Beardsley ends up in a *Kantian skeptical problematic* as well. The skeptical threat facing interpretation on the Kantian level takes the form of accusing critics of *not making sense*; the worry concerns whether critics are authoritative in using the concept of interpretation, whether they know what they are talking about. Here Beardsley tries to establish the criteria of interpretation and interpretive validity (questions on the Kantian level) in order to secure that valid interpretation really exists (the threat on the Cartesian level): he asks HOW interpretation is possible in order to establish WHETHER it is possible.

As a *literary skeptic about other minds* Beardsley in turn denies part of our criteria of interpretation through his wholesale rejection of the relevance of authorial intention in interpretation. Here I argue that Cavell has actually shown that this constitutes a kind of literary, interpretive, other-minds skepticism. I also claim that Cavell can give us fruitful alternatives to Beardsley's skeptical theorizing which can speak to the very problems (hard cases, interpretive conflicts, the possibility of overinterpretation) that first initiate the skeptical impulse of the Cartesian variety in interpretive skepticism. However, as I also hope to have shown, simply reading Cavell while philosophizing on interpretation is in no way a guarantee for staying clear of interpretive skepticism, as can be seen from the example of Davis.

I think one can summarize Cavell's response to the problems of interpretive practice that can invite skeptical reasoning, as an encouragement to indeed stick with those problems, and follow them through. This does not mean that he advises us to avoid theorizing, but that, in the presence of a hard case (such as in the form of a difficult modernist work), we allow ourselves to theorize *with* the work itself, allowing it to teach us how to approach it rather than escape its interpretive and theoretical invitation and challenge by fleeing to theory, such that we try to solve all the puzzlements *prior to* the fearful act of reading. Likewise, the sort of difficulties with which interpretive conflicts and possible overinterpretations confront us, are matters we should not try to ignore, or make invisible, by attempting to define interpretive criteria and the limits of validity in advance. Such prede-

fined criteria will not help us when we actually have to struggle with real difficulties of uncertainty. These kinds of problems of interpretation (interpretive conflicts, hard cases, and overinterpretation) may very well require theorizing – and theorizing that will have impact beyond a singular case – but such theoretical investigations should nonetheless be dealt with piecemeal, *through* interpretation, by looking, in each and every case, at the specificity of the problem that comes to light.

Chapter 6: Cleanth Brooks and Poetic Skepticism

> Tradition is not something that anyone can pick up, it's not a thread, that someone can pick up, if & when he pleases; any more than you can choose your own ancestors. Someone who has no tradition & would like to have it, is like an unhappy lover.[514]

> What is that sound high in the air
> Murmur of maternal lamentation
> Who are those hooded hordes swarming
> Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth
> Ringed by the flat horizon only
> What is the city over the mountains
> Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
> Falling towers
> Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
> Vienna London
> Unreal[515]

> We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)[516]

> An interpretation as such is different from and yet also the same as what it interprets. Unless it is both, it is not an interpretation. If it is not (in some sense) the same as what it interprets, it is not an interpretation but a new text, unrelated to the first; and if it is not (in some sense) different, it is not an interpretation of the text but a copy of it.[517]

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[514] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 86e.
[515] T.S. Eliot, "V. What the Thunder Said," 5th stanza, *The Waste Land* (1922) in *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909–1962* (1974) (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.67.
[516] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 531, p. 122e.
[517] Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, p. 87.

In the previous chapter I investigated Monroe C. Beardsley's theorizing on interpretation, and argued that Beardsley can be recognized as an interpretive skeptic on two counts. First he appears as a skeptical twin about interpretation and second he is a straightforward skeptic about authorial intentions. The irony of Beardsley's interpretive skepticism is that he runs into this skeptical problematic precisely through his efforts to save academic interpretation from any skeptical threat.

In this chapter, which coheres around the work of Cleanth Brooks, things will take a similar, but not identical, turn. If Beardsley theorized to protect academic interpretation, Brooks theorizes to protect poetry. I will explore, and hopefully be able to dissolve, some skeptical anxieties about the meaningfulness of poetry alongside certain anxieties we may have about both our access to that meaningfulness and our ability to express it in and through interpretation. I hope to do this by analyzing Brooks's dealings with these issues in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) and *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947).

Brooks, I will argue, is driven into *interpretive skepticism* by trying to fight off what I will call *poetic skepticism*. Poetic skepticism, as Brooks encounters it, concerns doubts whether (certain) poetry really is poetry. These doubts are in turn grounded in the suspicion that (certain) poetry is only *imagined sense*. I will claim that Brooks faces the threat of poetic skepticism on two fronts: through critical encounters with modernist poetry and through certain requirements that theory and philosophy places upon poetry. These two fronts may by all means coalesce, but in principle they can be separated, and thus I will discuss them separately.

It is occasionally noted, not least in discussions of Cavell and literary criticism, that Cavell articulates his understanding of literature and criticism by contrasting his views with the New Critics. In *The Claim of Literature* David Rudrum writes, for example:

> [Cavell] is keen to distance himself from the standard humanist critique of the (then) New Criticism […]: both New Critics and analytic philosophers are too frequently given to studying words in terms of appeals to form and structure, and although these terms mean completely different things in these disciplines – logical form and propositional structure in the case of analytic philosophy; literary, poetic, and symbolic structures and forms in the case of New Criticism – both tend to substitute theoretical entities for a more frank engagement with what particular human beings in particular circumstances say and mean by particular words.[518]

I do not wish to dispute Rudrum's claims about Cavell's self-understanding here. I think though that not only does Cavell effectively criticize and distance himself from certain features of the New Critical tradition, but that he

[518] Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 67.

also displays some deep affinities with it. I will investigate this dual relation by comparing Cavell to Brooks in this chapter – especially in terms of how they balance the relation between theory and practice in criticism. On that last relation, Rudrum writes the following:

> No theory of literature that I am aware of is altogether exempt from the paradoxical tendency to regard its object from a position of scholarly detachment or even remoteness while simultaneously promising to yield a fresh, heightened degree of proximity or even intimacy with the selfsame object of study. Perhaps the starkest example of this paradox can be dated right back to one of the discipline's defining moments: I.A. Richards's commitment to maintaining a critical, scientific distance from the text, while arguing that this distance is essential to an approach he calls "close" reading.[519]

I agree with Rudrum that most literary theories and critical movements share this mixture of practical intimacy and theoretical detachment in relation to literature – and New Criticism is most certainly no exception – but I will unpack this complex tension in ways different to Rudrum. For me, close reading clearly exemplifies the opposite pole to theory-driven detachment. And while I think Brooks gravitates around both poles, I would, on the one hand, pair up the intimate and practical engagement with literature with the practice of close reading, and on the other abstract remoteness with the more theoretical heritage from which Richards draws sustenance. In fact, this chapter will be structured so as to first analyze the first pole, then the second, and that order is combined with the comparison between Cavell and Brooks in the following way:

In the first part of this chapter, 6.1., I shall focus on the similarities between Brooks and Cavell. Here I will present and discuss the problem of *poetic skepticism* in relation to modernist poetry and show how Brooks defends the meaningfulness of modernist poetry against skeptical accusations from his rival critic Max Eastman. Since this particular skeptical threat is intimately connected with the difficulties that *modernist* poetry poses for the critic, I will analyze it in the light of Cavell's discussion of *fraudulence* and modernism. From this I hope to produce a clearer understanding of why the advent of modernism, and (according to Cavell) the omnipresent risk of fraudulence in both art and its criticism, lends the poetic interpreter's task a new desperate urgency. The discussion of modernism and fraudulence will furthermore inform Brooks and Eastman's debate regarding the role of *proof* in interpretation. In this context I will (in sections 6.1.4–6.1.9.) draw out some interesting affinities between Cavell and Brooks by comparing the Cavellian (and Wittgensteinian) injunction that we should "look and see" (in philosophy) with the New Critical method of *close reading*. This comparison will in turn bring into focus Cavell's own comparison between the grammar

[519] Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 7.

of appeals to "what we say when" in ordinary language philosophy and our critical activity and aesthetic judgments. In the final section of the first half of this chapter, 6.1.10., I will summarize these similarities and see what they reveal about the nature of aesthetic and poetic skepticism.

In the second part of the chapter I will look at the threat of poetic skepticism as it coalesces in Brooks from the area of theory or philosophy. If the first part of the chapter traces out the certain similarities between Brooks and Cavell, the second half of my comparison will instead accentuate differences, tensions, and sites of conflict points between them. In 6.2.2., I will specifically focus on Cavell's critique of Brooks. In the most famous essay of *The Well Wrought Urn*, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," Brooks expresses his well-known (and highly contested) thesis that no interpretive paraphrase can ever fully capture the poem's meaning. *The Well Wrought Urn* also claims that poetry has a different *kind of meaning* than the discourse of science. It is partly due to this special kind of meaning that poetry cannot be paraphrased, Brooks argues. In the second part of the chapter, I intend to accomplish two things. First I will demonstrate, in a similar way as I did with Beardsley, that Cavell's critique of Brooks in *Must We Mean What We Say?* can be characterized as a critique of interpretive skepticism. While Beardsley was a *skeptical twin* about interpretation and a straightforward skeptic about authorial intention, Brooks turns out to be an *epistemologist* about poetic meaning and a *straightforward skeptic* about interpretation. In fact, I will show that Brooks's interpretive skepticism ironically enough is created by his very effort to save poetry from poetic skepticism and the suspicion that (much) poetry is merely covert nonsense. I will thus argue that the interpretive skepticism Brooks unwillingly and unwittingly embraces is nothing but the flipside or the transposition of the poetic skepticism (about the meaningfulness of poetry) he otherwise tried to dismantle.

However, I also want to show, and this I will do in 6.2.3., what is also *right* (at least in a qualified sense) about Brooks's idea of the heresy of the paraphrase and thus to indicate what Cavell's critique fails to notice about it. Or perhaps rather than trying to find what is "right" about the idea *so expressed*, I would like to clarify what, in the logical relation between the poem and its interpretation, Brooks is (correctly) sensitive to, even if he misconstrues it in such a way that he ends up saying there is something we *cannot do* with regard to the meaning of poems, something we *cannot reach* in interpretation. I will therefore try to explain why Brooks feels *forced* to say this: to whom is Brooks responding when he rejects the idea that paraphrases are capable of capturing the meaning of the poem? This is furthermore a question I think Cavell has failed to ask: what motivates Brooks's (skeptical) theorizing on interpretation in the first place? This negelect makes Cavell's critique of Brooks, on the one hand accurate but on the other hand one-sided. By turning to one of Brooks's intellectual precursors, Wilbur Marshall Urban, quoted and praised in "The Heresy of Paraphrase," I will show why

Brooks thinks he needs a theory of poetic meaning in order to battle against a logical positivist conception of meaning still traceable in the writings of I.A. Richards. While Brooks's own proposed theory transforms him into an epistemologist about poetic meaning, I argue that his criticism nevertheless is valid and could be rehabilitated as grammatical remarks made in response to skeptical, dogmatic approaches to poetic interpretation.

Finally, in 6.2.4., I will try to explain why Cavell's reading fails to see and appreciate Brooks's critique – a fact in need of explanation since this critique brings Brooks so close to Cavell. In doing so, not only will I attempt once more to bring out similarities between them, but also I shall show how Cavell's account of *interpretive completion* can solve one of the central mystifications animating "The Heresy of Paraphrase," namely: how can interpretations ever reach completion if interpretive paraphrases never exhaust the meanings of poems? How do we know that the critical task is completed, that is, when can we bring a reading to an end, if there is always *more* to say?

6.1. Cleanth Brooks, Poetic Skepticism and Modernist Poetry

6.1.1. Poetic Skepticism as a Response to Modernist Hard Cases

To a reader of *The Well Wrought Urn,* it might not strike one as obvious that modernism, or modernist poetry, is a pertinent datum for an explication of the problems that Brooks seeks to explore therein. Interestingly, the most modern of the poets interpreted in the text is Yeats. By comparison, modernism does appear as a central topic in Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), a work which begins thus:

> Every poet that we read alters to some degree our total conception of poetry. Most poets, of course, modify it only a minute degree, and we continually talk as if our conception were not modified at all. We assume that poetry is something quite fixed and absolute, a stable world in the light of which we can judge whatever particular poet is to be considered. […] But from time to time poets appear who, if they are accepted at all, demand a radical revision of the existing conception of poetry. Of this sort are our modern poets, and herein lies the difficulty of accepting them, or, if they are accepted, the difficulty of accommodating them in the traditionally accepted pattern.[520]

The aim of *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* is twofold. It is an attempt both to vindicate modernist poetry and the poetry of the 17th century English met-

[520] Cleanth Brooks, "Preface," *Modern Poetry and The Tradition*, p. vii.

aphysical poets. These tasks are intimately intertwined in the book; Brooks wishes to defend both *by* showing that the modernist poets are the heirs to the metaphysical poets. By linking together the metaphysical and modernist poetry he not only wants to show that modernist poetry is a part of the English poetic tradition, but also to *alter* our view of that very tradition. For Brooks then, the acceptance or rejection of the modernist (and metaphysical) poets requires a rethinking of the very idea of poetry as such: "The harder-headed critic will see that he must either condemn the modern poets in great part, or admit them and modify his conception of poetry, and with it, many judgments of the poetry in the past."[521]

However, the difficulty of accepting modernist poetry does not only concern the problem of how one should assess its *aesthetic accomplishments* when it so bluntly goes against received wisdoms surrounding decorum and other previously established poetic conventions – not least, Brooks stresses, through its daring treatments of metaphors.[522] To that aesthetic difficulty is added the further, but interrelated, problem of how to interpret what this kind of poetry *means* at all:

> [I]f modern poetry does involve a critical revolution of the importance suggested, then any account of modern poetry which ignores its relation to traditional poetry will stress merely its accidental and superficial aspects. It will not succeed in making us aware of the full significance of modern poetry – probably will not succeed even in making modern poetry intelligible.[523]

The issue of the intelligibility and meaningfulness of modernist poetry with respect to traditional poetry, as well as the status of modernist poetry as constituting *poetry at all*, is something Brooks continues to discuss in the fourth essay of *The Well Wrought Urn*, entitled "What Does Poetry Communicate?" The essay begins in the following manner:

> The question of what poetry communicates, if anything, has been largely forced upon us by the advent of "modern" poetry. Some of that poetry is admittedly highly difficult – a very great deal of it is bound to *appear* difficult to the reader of conventional reading habits, even in spite of the fact – actually, in many cases, *because*, of the fact – that he is a professor of literature. For this reason, the difficult moderns are often represented as untraditional and generally irresponsible. (The War, incidentally, has encouraged the tendency: critics who ought to know better lend themselves to the popular plea

[521] Brooks, "Preface," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. viii.
[522] It is especially through their use of the metaphor that Brooks claims we must view the modernists as heirs to Donne and the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century: "[T]he metaphysical poets and the modernists stand opposed to both the neo-classic and Romantic poets on the issue of metaphor. And what can be said in defence of the moderns of our day and of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century? First, that things are not poetic *per se*, and conversely, that nothing can be said to be intrinsically unpoetic." Cleanth Brooks, "Metaphor and the Tradition," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. 22.
[523] Brooks, "Preface," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, pp. viii–ix.

> that we should go back to the good old days when a poet meant what he said and there was no nonsense about it.) The question, however, allows only one honest answer: modern poetry (if it is really poetry, and, at its best, it is really poetry) communicates whatever any other poetry communicates. The fact is that the question is badly asked. What does traditional poetry communicate?[524]

This quote is very condensed but immensely important, so let me go through, rather carefully, what Brooks is actually saying in this passage. Brooks claims that modern (or modernist) poetry *forces* us to rethink the meaningfulness of poetry. This means that we must ask not only *what* poetry communicates, but even *if* it communicates "anything" at all. He then suggests that this question proves particularly difficult to deal with for professional, academic interpreters. This fact further implies that it is their very familiarity with, and knowledge of, *traditional* poetry that makes academic critics especially prone to doubt in their encounters with modern poetry. So one should note that Brooks is not only registering the common, popular objection to modern poetry, namely that it is too complicated, too "irresponsible." Brooks is above all lamenting the way in which "critics who ought to know better" take part in this nostalgic complaint about how hard it is nowadays to know whether and how "the poet means what he says."

Rather than yearning for "the good old days," Brooks encourages us not to misrepresent the logical relationship between traditional and modern poetry. He asks us to see how this *critique of modern poetry* – if modern poetry indeed can be accepted as *poetry* at all, which he thinks that "at its best" it can – is actually nothing more, and nothing less, than a *critique of poetry as such*. This means that doubt concerning what *modern* poetry communicates (if anything), is tantamount to doubt concerning what *poetry* communicates (if anything).

This is a question that Brooks thinks is "badly asked" and his response to it is: "The question […] allows only one honest answer: modern poetry […] communicates whatever any other poetry communicates." [525] Furthermore,

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[524] Cleanth Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 67. I take it to be more or less obvious that when Brooks speaks of "modern" poetry, he has in mind modernist poetry. Later in the essay, Eliot, Auden, and Tate are mentioned as examples of this new sort of "difficult" poets. Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" p. 77.

[525] The fact that Brooks finds the very question about what poetry *in general* communicates to be "badly asked," is something I will come back to in the second half of this chapter. On this matter I find one of the most interesting combinations of affinities and differences between Brooks and Cavell. On the one hand I will show that Brooks thinks that there is something entirely wrong in demanding a theory of what poetry in general "means," how it succeeds in meaning anything, in order to secure that poetry *does* mean anything – and in this intuition he is close to Cavell's thinking on the matter. On the other hand, Brooks at the same time feels forced to present such a theory himself, precisely to protect the meaningfulness of poetry against those critics that accuse poetry of being nonsensical unless a theoretical account can be provided. So even if Brooks finds the question "badly asked" he still tries to *answer* it in *The Well Wrought Urn.* And in doing so he distances himself from Cavell.

while acknowledging that at least *some* of the new writing claiming to be poetry indeed *is* poetry, Brooks also touches upon the question of how to tell the difference between real poetry from fake poetry, the genuine artifact from the fraud. The way this question is posed in the above quote furthermore suggests that the question of *realness*, in this context, is closely related to the question of *intelligibility*. Whether one can understand the (purported) poetry *as* poetry is intimately connected with whether one can *interpret* that (purported) poetry at all. The question of the *realness* of poetry is thus also a question of *interpretability*.

What I think one sees here, and what I will investigate in the first part of this chapter, is how Brooks faces an interesting form of *poetic skepticism* that comprises two interrelated skeptical problematics: *aesthetic skepticism* and *meaning skepticism about poetry*. Aesthetic skepticism, as I shall use the term, is skepticism about art. On the Cartesian level it is articulated through questions like: how do we know (do we really know) whether something is (real) art or not? On the Kantian level it concerns the grammar and conditions of possibility of art: how do we know (do we really know) the meaning and criteria of "art"? As I will try to show, the aesthetic skepticism that Brooks encounters in the analysis of poetry – how do we know (do we know) whether something is really poetry or not? – comes in the form of a charge of the *nonsensicality* of poetry. It is for this reason that the question of the *realness* of poetry becomes, for Brooks, a question about the *meaningfulness* of poetry. I do not think these problems (the aesthetic and the semantic) are necessarily connected in this way. It is most certainly possible to imagine an aesthetic skepticism regarding poetry (how do we know if something is really poetry?) that does not center on the question of meaningfulness (how do we know if this purported poetry really is meaningful?).

However, this is how poetic skepticism faces Brooks and I think that the nature of the problematic – as it is evoked by modernist poetry and the difficulty such poetry poses for the critic – will become more clear if one considers at some length who, more specifically, Brooks is arguing *against*. I will therefore in the following section bring out the skeptical charges against modernist poetry found in the work of Max Eastman.

6.1.2. Max Eastman and the Charge of Nonsensicality in Modernist Poetry

Brooks criticizes Max Eastman's *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science* (1931) in both *The Well Wrought Urn* and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*.[526] If one is to trust Allen Tate, Eastman's *The Literary Mind* and Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* are so closely interlocked in

[526] Max Eastman, *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science* (New York and London: C. Scribners' Sons, 1931).

common debate that they should be read together (even if Tate considers them to be of "uneven value").[527]

In *The Literary Mind*, Eastman defends a communicative theory of poetry that claims "poetry, and indeed all writing" should first and foremost be seen as "a communicative act."[528] As the title of his book indicates, Eastman criticizes modernist poetry from a specific, scientistic point of view. He continuously uses the hard sciences as an ideal while describing what sort of discourse or linguistic enterprise he regards as fully meaningful. However, the objections Eastman makes against modernist poetry – at least when these seem in any way forceful – are not rooted in scientistic dogma but in feelings of doubt, frustration, and alienation in the face of a specific instance of poetry. In that capacity I think Eastman gives voice to a quite common experience among readers of difficult and esoteric poetry: a frustrated uncertainty regarding whether there actually is *anything there* to admire at all?

Eastman's conclusion is "no," and his objection to modernist poetry is starkly put: it actually says *nothing* – it is bogus. In his view "the tendencies in poetic literature called 'modernism'" are nothing but the abandonment of "all pretense to understand or interpret life."[529] According to Eastman, modernist "poets are taking refuge in pure poetry and unintelligibility" and "the critics are conspiring with them."[530] *The Literary Mind* therefore sets out to "explain why grown-up and supposedly intellectual and judicious critics peruse these poems that they cannot understand a word of, and praise them extravagantly without a blush."[531] Eastman's main critique is that modernist poetry is *nonsense* or at least that a great deal of modernist poetry is utterly nonsensical.[532] On closer inspection Eastman seems to allow for *degrees* of "uncommunicativeness" in modernist poetry. He writes:

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[527] Allen Tate, "Understanding Modern Poetry," (1940) *Essays of Four Decades*, p. 157. I suspect I hardly need to add with whom Tate sides on that point. One needs only to note here that *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* is dedicated to Allen Tate in order to show how closely Brooks and Tate are related.

[528] Max Eastman, "Poets Talking to Themselves," *The Literary Mind,* p. 93. Tate criticizes this view and labels it "the fallacy of communication in poetry," and considers it to be "no less a fallacy in the writing of poetry than of critical theory." The result of this fallacy can be seen, according to Tate, in the "poor" English nineteenth-century poems. These poems are aesthetically inadequate, Tate thinks, precisely because the poets wrote them in order to communicate ideas and feelings "which they secretly thought could be better conveyed by science." See Allen Tate, "Tension in Poetry," *Essays of Four Decades*, p. 58. In the field of literary theory and criticism, it is critics like Eastman who are in this sense "fallacious." Tate does not mention Eastman in "Tension in Poetry," but his critique of Eastman in "Understanding Modern Poetry" renders it pretty clear that Eastman would be the typical lamentable critic Tate has in mind.

[529] Max Eastman, "Preface," *The Literary Mind*, p. vii.

[530] Eastman, "Preface," p. vii.

[531] Eastman, "Poets Talking to Themselves," p. 110.

[532] In fairness to Eastman it should be noted that not *every* poem or poet described as "modernist" is in his view unintelligible. There is a variety of modernist poetry that Eastman appreciates which he thinks is part of "the cultivation of pure poetry" (this cultivation is contrasted with "the cult of unintelligibility"). The poets of "pure poetry" are, according to Eastman not

> If you pick up a book by Hart Crane, E.E. Cummings, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Edith Sitwell, or any of the "modernists," and read a page innocently, I think the first feeling you will have is that the author isn't telling you anything. It may seem that he isn't telling you anything because he doesn't know anything. Or it may seem that he knows something all right, but he won't tell. In any case he is uncommunicative. He is unfriendly. He seems to be playing by himself, and offering you somewhat incidentally the opportunity to look on.[533]

One can, I think, detect at least four different forms of alleged uncommunicativeness in Eastman's critique of modernist poetry.[534] The first class of uncommunicative poets are those who *know* things and have things to say but who wish to gain *literary prestige* by limiting the audience to a small group of well-educated "knowers." I will call this first category of modernist poet *the snob*:

> The authors […] narrow the circle of communication to a small group of specialists in a particular type of learning – by no means the most important type – and […] communicate even to the members of this circle only a part of the content of the poem. Most of the "cognoscenti," as I know them, will be so tickled by the poet's assuming they know everything he is alluding to, that they will get along better than others without the more specific pleasure of finding out what he is alluding to.[535]

The abundant and intricate intertextuality to be found in poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce definitely renders them membership in this first category. The snob poets may *say* that they do things like abandon "romanticism" or repudiate "the distinction between subject-matter and form," that they are "revolting against the tyranny of the general reader," and are thus being "primitive," "intellectual," "aesthetic, " or "clinging to the 'hard matter-of-fact skeleton of poetic logic.'"[536] However, in Eastman's view "[t]here is no such skeleton and no such logic."[537] Instead, these poets are "withdrawing into themselves. They are communicating to fewer people, they are communicating less, and what they communicate is less definitely determined. And this is true of the whole movement, all the way from free verse to free association."[538]

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actually trying to *describe* experiences in their poetry but rather *share* their experiences directly with their readers. See Max Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," *The Literary Mind*, p. 57.

[533] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 57.

[534] Since these four classifications are mine and not his, nothing stops Eastman from "putting" the same poet in more than one category. However, since what separates these groups are not the individuality of the poets but the form of critique Eastman launches against them, I do not think this is a problem.

[535] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 71.

[536] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 58.

[537] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 58.

[538] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 58.

A second kind of uncommunicative modernist poetry is created when the poet, as Eastman puts it, is "playing by himself," or "talking to himself" in strictly private ways. A poet of this kind asks the reader to watch private verbal acts which *might* mean something to the poet but which the reader has no chance whatsoever of making sense of because the poet is willfully denying him or her the means to do so. This is the *idiosyncratic* or *private poet* who *could* tell the reader what he or she means but prefers not to. The poet has chosen a form of verbal solipsism: "Communication is here reduced to a minimum. The values are private – as private as the emotional life of the insane."[539]

What is interesting here is that Eastman also tries to *prove* that the meaning of such poetry is in principal beyond the reader's reach. His strategy is to play a trick on his own reader: after having criticized a purported part of a "poem" by Gertrude Stein, Eastman admits that "the passage quoted was not from Gertrude Stein, but from the ravings of a maniac cited by Kraeplin in his *Clinical Psychiatry*."[540] According to Eastman, this shows that the words of a madman and the poems of Gertrude Stein are "essentially the same thing, you see, except that Gertrude Stein perpetrates it voluntarily, and – to judge by external appearance – not quite so well. It is private literature."[541]

Eastman's trick – of making us believe that the words of a lunatic's were the words of a great modernist poet – brings me to the third category of uncommunicative poetry. The third kind is the *counterfeit-poet* who is involving you in a poetic *hoax*:

> Practical and downright people can hardly help suspecting that there is something of a hoax about this whole cult of uncommunicative writing. And the suspicion is not confined to those remote from it, either. I have heard two personal friends of E.E. Cummings debating whether his prosodical and punctational gymnastics have not been a joke at the expense of the critics of poetry. One of them thinks Cummings will some day come out and announce that he has been joking; the other insist with fervent and faithful admiration that he is really as crazy as he seems.[542]

The poet who takes part in such a hoax does not mean *anything* with the poetry – not even privately – and knows it. This "poet" is having an intricate "joke at the expense of critics of poetry." For the reader and critic, however, this counterfeit-poet is very hard to separate (even for close friends, the quote above suggests) from what I take to be the *fourth* category of Eastman's uncommunicative poets. The fourth type does not mean anything with

[539] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 63.
[540] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," pp. 63–64.
[541] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 64. Likewise, James Joyce is considered to have made up a private "language of his own" and created a "literary form [which] also finds its involuntary parallel in the madhouse." Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 65.
[542] Eastman, "Poets Talking to Themselves," p. 103.

his or her poetry either, but in contrast to the counterfeit-poet, *the confused poet*, as I will call this category, remains unaware of this fact. The confused poet is therefore the one most deeply entrenched in his or her own poetic nonsense. Or as Eastman puts it: this poet is "really as crazy as he seems."

Now, I find it significant that Eastman does not choose to speak of the "uncommunicative" modernist poets in terms of these four categories. Nonetheless, I have decided to make these distinctions explicit since I think they help to clarify the different objections that combine and mix in Eastman's critique of modernist poetry. I take it to be a substantial part of Eastman's problem that he is often *unsure* of what kind of "unintelligible" poetry he is dealing with. Since he cannot make sense of the poetry in question, and since he cannot trust the poet writing it, his uneasiness and bewilderment is in part caused by the fact that he cannot tell whether the poet is: 1) merely a *snob*; 2) *idiosyncratically* obsessed with private meanings he or she wishes to expose without wishing to make intelligible for a wider audience; 3) a *counterfeit* trickster-poet, or 4) an honest but really *confused* (or as he puts it) "crazy" person who is merely imagining him- or herself as making meaningful poetry. This spectrum of "uncommunicative" poets also has, to some extent, a counterpart among the modernist *critics*, in Eastman view:

> In my opinion, the admirers of modernist poetry as a distinctively intellectual phenomenon may be divided into two classes. First, those who think they understand what is unintelligible because they do not know what it is to understand […]. Second, those who do know what it is to understand, but find so little in real life to exercise their understandings upon that they develop a devout passion for conundrums, riddles, rebuses, acrostics, logogriphs, and games of solitaire and twenty questions.[543]

The first class of critics that Eastman speaks of is to my mind the counterpart to what I called the *confused* poet. This critic genuinely, but mistakenly, believes in the meaningfulness of the poetry he or she admires but fails to see that he or she is being duped by nonsense. The second class Eastman mentions gives the counterpart to the first category of poets, that is, the *snobbish* critic who likes to be, as Eastman described it, "tickled" by riddles only an insider would be able to solve. Finally, I think that the critical counterparts to the idiosyncratic poet and the counterfeit-poet would be the critics who live and thrive in the shady border area between self-deception and hypocrite pretense: they suspect something bogus in the poetry but play along all the same. Together these poets and critics make up what Eastman calls "the cult of unintelligibility."

In this situation, where poetry seems flooded with pretentious, nonsensical rubbish, Eastman sees no other way to relieve himself of suspicion than to demand *proof*. But what would constitute proof of genuineness and mean-

[543] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," pp. 71–72.

ingfulness in poetry? Eastman here turns to the sciences for guidance – what he desires is something like *an empirical experiment* to settle the question of what poetry means (if it means anything at all) and what its claimed aesthetic qualifications may be. The proposed method of testing this is as follows:

> [T]ake two of the most enthusiastic admirers of this poetry […] – lead them into separate sound-proof chambers and permit them to read this poem in the august presence of a sphygmograph, a machine designed to record in a white line on a black roller the actual pulsations of the "rapid, capricious, and melodic line" as it is "marked" by these signs of punctuation. Is there any reason to believe that, punctuation being what it is and human nature being what it is, the two readers would produce curves showing the same "accelerations and hesitations" at the points where these punctuation marks appear? Of course they would not. It is only necessary to mention the experiment. The critic, therefore, is not talking sense. He is talking what I call literarious nonsense.[544]

If modernist critics are to be deemed trustworthy then Eastman demands of them that they reach *the same results*, just as the scientists in the lab should. Yet Eastman *already knows* this is not something the critics are able to do. He does not even think he needs to conduct this "experiment." For him, this imaginary test nevertheless settles the matter regarding the meaningfulness of modernist poetry:

> Where these Doctors of Unintelligibility disagree to that extent […] as to what they are getting out of unintelligible literature – what it is, and where it is, and how they get it – that we are practically driven to the conclusion they do not get it at all. […] There is no communication and no demand for communication on either side. But there is an *illusion of communication*. Both the poet and the critic assume that something passes between them […]. "What has actually passed between them?" […] [T]he simple answer [is] "Nothing."[545]

Eastman is clearly charging modernist poetry and criticism with communicational skepticism (to speak with Talbot Taylor): there is only an *illusion* of communication between the two. If presumably competent critics such as Joseph Wood Krutch, I.A. Richards, and Merill Moore all have come to different conclusions about the meaning of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), this proves, Eastman thinks, the nonsensicality of the poem: "If these three skilled and sympathetic readers have directly opposed views both of the meaning of the poem and the emotions conveyed by it, I think we may be sceptical of a fourth who assures us that the meaning and emotion are conveyed to him."[546] The conclusion Eastman draws is that in modernism there

[544] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 62.
[545] Eastman, "Poets Talking to Themselves," p. 118.
[546] Eastman, "Poets Talking to Themselves," p. 112.

is no way to differentiate insane ramblings from praiseworthy poetry, no way of telling the real from the fake – which in turn implies that in modernism this distinction has no bearing and therefore that there is no real poetry of this kind.

6.1.3. Brooks's Response to Eastman

The first thing I think one should note in Brooks's response to Eastman is that while Brooks argues against him, he also acknowledges that Eastman is touching upon real difficulties, both for the modernist poets and for readers and critics of modernist poetry. For example, Brooks admits that among the new poets there have been examples of false prophets and of unwarranted critical praise. In "The Modern Poet and the Tradition" he writes that "one must realise that a number of poets were then hailed as geniuses, not so much for what they wrote as for what they refused to write. Too often the American poet, after discarding the rags of Victorianism, was to be found walking in a barrel."[547] Brooks is thus not claiming that all poets who attempted to radically revise poetry have been successful. When such attempts have failed, the poet has been left with a fruitfuless "choice between the raw, unqualified present, and the dead past."[548] Merely refusing to write in a dead, obsolete style will not yield aesthetically satisfying poetry. New attempts must still preserve the vital roots of the poetic tradition it is partially rejecting: "The poets who have been able to avoid the dilemma have succeeded in avoiding it because they could weld past with present."[549] This means, according to Brooks, that "[t]he problem presented by an attempt to hold on to a tradition is, thus, ultimately a problem of sincerity or integrity" for the modernist poets.[550]

While Brooks clearly disapproves of Eastman's communicative theory of poetry, arguing that "most proponents of poetry as communication have […] used this view of poetry to damn the modern poets," he nevertheless recognizes that "[m]any readers find modern poetry difficult, and difficult in a special sense."[551] Furthermore, he concedes that a "reader brought up on nineteenth-century poetry may quite understandably conclude that the poet is writing with his tongue in his cheek, indulging in a private joke at the expense of the reader."[552] However, having admitted this, Brooks claims that we should understand these difficulties and the suspicions they feed, in another manner than Eastman does – what they reveal is *not* that modernist

[547] Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition," p. 75.
[548] Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition," p. 80.
[549] Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition," p. 80.
[550] Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition," pp. 80–81.
[551] Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" p. 75, "Metaphor and the Tradition," p. 13.
[552] Brooks, "Metaphor and the Tradition," p. 14.

poetry is unintelligible or bogus. In ”What Does Poetry Communicate?” he writes:

> Much modern poetry is difficult. Some of it may be difficult because the poet is snobbish and definitely wants to restrict his audience, though this is a strange vanity and much rarer than Mr. Eastman would have us think. Some modern poetry is difficult because it is bad – the total experience remains chaotic and incoherent because the poet could not master his material and give it a form. Some modern poetry is difficult because of the special problems of our civilization. But a great deal of modern poetry is difficult for the reader simply because so few people, relatively speaking, are accustomed to reading *poetry as poetry.* The theory of communication throws the burden of proof upon the poet, overwhelmingly and at once. The reader says to the poet: Here I am; it's your job to "get it across" to me – when he ought to be assuming the burden of proof himself.[553]

What I first want to stress here is that Brooks indeed grants that Eastman is *occasionally* right. There *are* such things as snobbish poets and critics. But Eastman, according to Brooks, exaggerates the problem. The difficulties a reader may face in modernist poetry often have other sources (for example, that the poet might have failed, that the poem is simply bad, that the theme of the poem might be hard to understand because it addresses problems that *are* especially complex and so on). What for Brooks is of greater importance is that this exaggerated focus on snobbish poets and critics distracts from the *central* source of this difficulty, namely that "so few people, relatively speaking, are accustomed to reading *poetry as poetry*." Here one can once again see how the question of what poetry *means* is intimately related to the question of what poetry *is*. Brooks proposes that many readers of poetry fail to understand the modernists because they are not accustomed to do the interpretive *work* that comes with reading poetry *as poetry*; they are unaccustomed to the sort of attitude and effort it requires.

It is because of such a limited understanding of what *reading* poetry necessitates that the reader *misplaces* the onus on the poet for drawing out what the poem says; *the burden of proof* lay with the author. The reader unwittingly imagines that he or she can remain *passive* in the process, with this *passivity* in turn making understanding impossible. In the following passage from "Understanding Modern Poetry," Allen Tate argues the same point:

> The complainant [who finds modern poetry difficult] assumes that he understands all English poetry up to, say, about, 1917 – a date that I select because in that year Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* was published. But, as a matter of fact, the complainant does not understand Marvell and Donne any better than he understands Eliot. […] This kind of poetry must have the direct and *active* participation of the reader who today, because he has been pampered by bad education, expects to lie down and be *passive* when he is read-

[553] Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" p. 76.

> ing poetry. He admits, for some obscure reason, that poetry is part of his education; but he has been taught to believe that education is *conditioning:* something is being done to him, he is not doing anything himself. And this is why he cannot read poetry.[554]

This quote underlines once more that for Brooks and Tate the question of understanding modernist poetry can neither be severed from the question of understanding *poetry as such*, nor from the question of what constitutes a *poetic tradition*. Furthermore, the failure to understand modernist poetry, which is the result of undue *passivity*, is in turn something considered to be the result, at least partially, of "bad education." The passivity is also not necessarily found in someone unaccustomed to literature. On the contrary, Brooks suggests that it is in particular the *professional* reader who, not "in spite of the fact" but precisely *because* he or she is a "professor of literature," is unable to understand modernist poetry. Tate even goes as far to say:

> Mr. Eastman has been widely read by professors of English, who are really rather glad to hear this sort of thing, since it spares them the trouble of reading a body of poetry for which there are no historical documents and of which generations of other professors have not told them what to think.[555]

Radically new poetry, Brooks and Tate stress, cannot be understood through the application of received wisdoms about the tradition. Since modernist poetry contests traditional poetic conventions, these conventions will not give you, as it were, the "logic" or poetics of the new poetry. Instead you are *forced* in a quite palpable way to trust your own judgment and ear: the reader has to improvise in order to make sense of, and aesthetically assess, the poetry. However, through modernist poetry something true about the understanding of traditional poetry – as well as about poetry as such – is revealed, namely that not even the most conventional traditional poetry can be understood *merely* through passive application of received conventions either. "Every poet alters to some degree our total conception of poetry," Brooks claims, and while the modern poets "if they are to be accepted at all, demand a radical revision of the existing conception of poetry," traditional poets also modify the existing conception, although to a "minute degree."[556] This means that *no* poetry can be understood passively, though *prima facie* the inadequacy of passivity may not be as obvious with a case of traditional poetry that sits well with established conventions.

This is why the criticized traditional *education* is not merely charged with being, say, obsolete or insufficient in relation to modernist poetry, it is declared as being poor in itself. Tate and Brooks do not disapprove of literary

[554] Tate, "Understanding Modern Poetry," p. 163.
[555] Tate, "Understanding Modern Poetry," p. 158.
[556] Brooks, "Preface," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. vii.

history as such, nor do they deny its centrality for the teaching of poetry. What they oppose is an education that *places undue emphasis on* such authorities at the expense of, or instead of, the authority of the reader's own judgment. Passivity is furnished when the authority of "historical documents" and the "generations of professors" are not used to inform and cultivate the literary student's own judgment and authority, but are rather used to *replace* it, by *telling* readers "what to think," to speak with Tate. While discussing how the metaphysical and modernist poetry use metaphors in similar ways that are inconsistent with the aesthetic standards of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Brooks writes in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*:

> If the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century principles for testing the goodness of metaphor are too narrow, what is to be the test? When is a figure justified? One must not hope for a neat formulation which can be applied *a priori*. Indeed, it is just this *a priori* application of the conventional tests of simplicity and decoration which does most damage at the present time. Each figure must be dealt with separately and individually."[557]

As I said, Brooks makes this point first and foremost in response to modernist (and metaphysical) poetry, but this New Critical conception, as I understand it, picks up an aspect of the grammar of poetry more generally: that in order to assess whether something *works poetically* (aesthetically), you need to find out *if* and *how* it "function[s] integrally in a poem."[558] Even in convention-laden poetry, knowledge of those conventions will not take you *all* the way – they will not judge *for you* whether a metaphor works or not. They will at least serve as a guide, though it is you who is ultimately responsible for *actively* applying the criteria. In modernism, however, such criteria are lacking. It therefore becomes all the more true that the eventual success of any given metaphor must be judged "separately and individually," and that no principle can identify in advance, a priori, what actually works aesthetically.

In an analogous way, when investigating whether a poem is actually *meaningful* or not, Brooks claims that "the best defence against the charge of unintelligibility is to submit detailed interpretations" of that very poetry.[559] This means the therapy Brooks prescribes for Eastman's suspicion that modern poetry is a kind of fake-poetry – since it supposedly says *nothing* – is close reading. Close readings of poems are also what *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* as well as *the Well Wrought Urn* mainly offer their readers. Through close textual analysis the critic can demonstrate the meaning and aesthetic accomplishment of the poetry in question.

[557] Brooks, "Metaphor and the Tradition," p. 25.
[558] Brooks, "Metaphor and the Tradition," p. 23.
[559] Brooks, "Preface," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, pp. xi–x.

6.1.4. Cavell on Fraudulence and Modernism

At this juncture I will turn to Cavell and his discussion of fraudulence and modernism. I think the problematic Cavell calls fraudulence will not only bring out more clearly the nature of aesthetic skepticism and thus be helpful for the analysis of poetic skepticism Brooks is supplying. Furthermore I hope to show, in this and the remaining sections of this first part of the chapter, that substantial affinities exist between how Cavell and Brooks respond to such skepticism.

Cavell describes the suspicion of *fraudulence* in art as that feeling of something which has the *look* of art, or *claims* to be art, and yet is not really art after all.[560] This is not a suspicion limited to modernist art per se. Nonetheless the suspicion is intensified once art enters modernism. This is hardly surprising, since modernism is precisely that condition in which an art form begins to question and transform itself in some radical manner. Cavell describes modernism as the very state in which an art form *turns into philosophy*. The idea is not that the art form, say literature, ceases to be literature and turns into something else; rather, at this point, it enters a continuous effort to *become* itself, to reinvent itself as art – it has to question itself and its own central concepts. As the art form, in this case literature or more specifically poetry, turns into philosophy it can no longer rely on itself as knowing what it is. It must *make* itself known, to itself and others, by inventing itself as *that* which now is what the art form is. But what *that* is, or should be, is not established before that transformation has succeeded.[561]

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[560] J.M. Bernstein describes it thus: "Fraudulent works avail themselves of the look of an artwork while disavowing the responsibilities of art." Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 96.

[561] Stephen Mulhall suggests that this intimate relation between philosophy and modernism could be seen the other way around too, so that Cavell's philosophical writing, as well as Wittgenstein's are modernist: "[T]he work of the *Investigations* and *Claim of Reason* appears as essentially modernist. […] [T]his is because neither writer nor readers possess a common fund of agreed-upon conventions that they might call upon or recall to control their sense of what a philosophical problem is, what might count as its solution, of what resources might be used to discover those solutions, what might count as a mistaken resolution […] ; the present philosophical task is continuously to improve them, and to do so through the writing of texts that offer statements so personal as to permit communication without convention, or the origination of new conventions." Mulhall, "On Refusing to Begin," p. 31. I think this is a very helpful characterization of the works of Cavell and Wittgenstein, though it might cause its reader some initial bewilderment; if modernist art is characterized as art when it reaches a philosophical stage or condition (or as art *becoming* philosophy), what happens when *that* description of modernism is projected back onto philosophy? (Is *modernist philosophy* philosophy that enters into a philosophical stage or condition, or philosophy *becoming* philosophy? Was philosophy not already philosophy?) But the point is surely that modernist philosophy, in Mulhall's sense, is a more radical form of self-reflective philosophy, questioning what philosophy is and can be, challenging philosophical traditions and conventions: in relation to its own tradition it risks not even being recognized *as* philosophy by philosophers (perhaps seen instead as mere "literature"). However, I read Cavell as saying that philosophy, in such a case, to a certain extent, *always* has to be (or should be) "modernist" since it is also supposed

As a consequence, in assessing whether a modernist artwork actually is art, one can no longer rely on the (old) criteria of art since if it is art – i.e. if it will be accepted as art – that means that our criteria of art will *change* with this new instance. The modernist work will thus have to establish the very criteria by which it will *count* as art. Or as Espen Hammer puts it:

> For Cavell, the "severe burden" of modernism means that as conventions lose their authority, art explicitly becomes a problem for itself. No longer is there an undisputed agreement as to what art is as such, nor as to what the purpose and meaning of the individual arts might be, that is, what *kind* of object, say, a sculpture is.[562]

The severe burden of the modernist artist is to be able *to mean* something *as* art, a problematic I touched upon at the end of chapter 4 when I demonstrated how Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein struggled with this very task in both their prose and poetry. Another way to formulate the same problem would be to say that the artist has to make a new projection of the word "art" that will be *both* radically new (thus necessitating a *change* in criteria) *and* still count as an extension, and continuation of that very criteria. In "Music Discomposed," Cavell writes that "What looks like 'breaking with tradition'" is in fact an effort to "keep faith with tradition."[563] An actual *break* with the tradition of an art form, like painting, would result in *failed* attempts to change and recreate that art form. It would mean "not that the tradition is broken, but that these works are irrelevant to that tradition, i.e., they are not paintings, whatever their pleasures."[564] This situation, Cavell claims, implies that "modern art, if and where it exists, *forces* the issue of sincerity, depriving the artist and his audience of every measure except absolute attention to one's experience and absolute honesty in expressing it."[565]

Here I think one can see the *first* similarity between Brooks and Cavell. Not only do both stress the role that *sincerity* plays for the modernist poet in this situation.[566] But furthermore, when Cavell writes that "what the modern puts in question is not merely, so to speak, itself, but its tradition as a whole,"[567] this clearly aligns with Brooks's New Critical contention that "if they [the modernist poets] are accepted at all," this requires "a radical revision of the existing conception of poetry" and that "herein lies the difficulty of accepting them, or, if they are accepted, the difficulty of accommodating

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to ask, in order to stay true to itself (i.e. to philosophy), questions about its own conditions, possibility, and intelligibility.

[562] Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 98.

[563] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 206.

[564] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 207.

[565] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 211.

[566] Cf. Brooks's claim that for the modernist poet "[t]he problem presented by an attempt to hold on to a tradition is, thus, ultimately a problem of sincerity or integrity." Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition," pp. 80–81.

[567] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 222.

them in the traditionally accepted pattern."[568] And when Cavell writes that modernist art "is trying to find the limits or essence of its own procedures," which "means that it is not clear a priori what counts, or will count" as art, I think his point is closely related to Brooks's point that no "*a priori* application of the conventional tests" can assess whether modernist metaphors work poetically or not – that, on the contrary, such traditional aesthetic criteria do "most damage at the present time. Each figure must be dealt with separately and individually."[569] For both Cavell and Brooks it is essential that the modernist artist must both follow and change the tradition, and that he or she can *fail* in the attempt to do so, even if it is not clear in advance what would constitute succeeding and failing.

This situation of course becomes a fertile ground for suspicions of fraudulence, since how are we to *know* whether this particular modernist work *should* be acknowledged as art – whether it actually succeeds in establishing this balance – if we cannot fall back on our old criteria in making assessments about art? This problematic reveals the counter-part of the artist's burden, namely the burden of the *audience/critics* of modernist art. In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," Cavell writes:

> It is, I take it, significant about modernism and its "permanent revolution" that its audience recurrently tells itself the famous stories of riots and walkouts and outrages that have marked its history. It is as though the *impulse* to shout fraud and storm out is always present, but the fear of the possible consequence overmasters the impulse. Remember Saint-Saëns: He said the Emperor had no clothes, and then history stripped him naked.[570]

One thing Cavell points out here, which speaks to Eastman's suspicion of a "cult of uncommunicative writing," is that fraudulence is not only something that the artist, or the artwork, may be suspected of rightly or wrongly.[571] What Cavell calls *the avant-garde* audience is a type of audience that exemplifies a certain fraudulent attitude towards art that is an inherent possibility in criticism as such, but which tends to become more actualized when the art form it interprets enters the modernist problematic. "Avant-garde" critics (in Cavell's sense) are so afraid of not being on the right side of the battle when

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[568] Brooks, "Preface," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. vii. This is of course not a unique way of looking at the relation between modernist art and the tradition. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot makes a similar statement. See T.S. Eliot, Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Sacred Wood*. See also Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism*, p. 44.

[569] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 219, and Brooks, "Metaphor and the Tradition," p. 25.

[570] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," pp. 205–206.

[571] Brent Kalar suggests that Cavell's "early railings against 'fraudulence' should be viewed […] as primarily directed towards critics, rather than artists." Brent Kalar, "Cavell on the Human Interest of Art and Philosophy," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, p. 66. I am not as convinced as Kalar about this, I think Cavell means that fraudulence is a real possibility that applies equally to artists, works, and critics.

art history is written (on the winning side) – and so anxious of being viewed as reactionary – that they jump on any new, revolutionary trend passing by, claiming to be art. Or they may not jump on *any* such trend, but at least the ones they find most likely to be officially acknowledged, by some official authority, as the winning ones.

This means – and here one finds a *second* similarity – that Cavell, just like Brooks, *acknowledges* the phenomenon which Eastman records. Fraudulent poetry and critics *exist*: there are poets claiming to have produced art when they have not and, by extension, critics that claim to have understood things they have not.[572] However, there is a counterpart to the avant-garde critic that is equally fraudulent, Cavell claims; this is the *philistine* critic. The philistine critic *always* rejects the modernist work claiming to be art – a strategy which perhaps can be viewed as safer in the moment, but riskier when history is to be written: "The philistine audience cannot afford to admit the new; the *avant-garde audience cannot* afford not to."[573] I will shortly spell out how Eastman himself typifies this flip-side of the "avant-garde" critic – who he charges with fraudulence – and how in fact both kinds become skeptical of art.

What separates Brooks and Cavell from Eastman is thus neither that the former deny that fraudulence is a *real* risk and possibility in art and criticism, nor that this risk indeed becomes greater in modernism. Rather, what ultimately separates Brooks and Cavell from Eastman is *how* they conceive of this risk, what they understand the phenomenon of fraudulence to be, how they think it should be approached, and, finally, what it can be said to reveal about the logic and conditions of art and criticism – both modernist and traditional. I will unpack these differences further by looking at two attempts to deal with suspicions of fraudulence that Cavell thinks misunderstand the nature of the problem.

6.1.5. Fraudulence and "Experts" – The "Wait and See" Strategy

The first of these two misguided ways to approach suspicions of fraudulence is to treat the question of whether something is art or not *merely* as a historical or empirical question: as a question that can be settled by establishing what some group, institution, or other category of *experts* decide to *call* "art." This strategy can be named the "wait and see" strategy. Cavell writes about it in the following way:

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[572] As a curiosity one can note that they even use the same image of fraudulence, namely as *nakedness* here. Cavell alludes to H.C. Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes," see *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen*, ed. With an introduction and notes by Maria Tatar, transl. by Maria Tatar and Julie K. Allen (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), pp. 5–16. Brooks, write of a poet who "after discarding the rags of Victorianism, was to be found walking in a barrel." Brooks, "The Modern Poet and the Tradition," p. 75.

[573] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 206.

> A familiar answer [to the question whether something is really art or a fraud] is that time will tell. But my question is: *What* will time tell? That certain departures in art-like pursuits have become established (among certain audiences, in textbooks, on walls, in college courses); that *someone* is treating them with the respect due, we feel, to art; that no one no longer has the right to question their status? But in waiting for time to tell that, we miss what the present tells – that the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art. […] [In this respect] modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art. (That is almost a definition of modernism, not to say its purpose.)[574]

"*What* will time tell?" Well, while you are waiting for time (and others) to tell you whether something is fraudulent or not, what it says about *you* in the meantime is that you have not shouldered you own judgment. You have not struggled with the work as it invited you to struggle with it and you have thus failed to make up your own mind about it. You have not done the work required yourself but, to speak with Brooks and Tate, you have instead remained *passive*.[575] Or as Tate writes in "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer" (1941): "If we wait for history to judge there will be no judgment; for if we are not history then history is nobody."[576]

Here one can see a *third* important similarity between New Criticism and Cavell: if a modernist work has issued a challenge to art and its tradition – or in Brooks's case to poetry – if it has asked its readers to ponder upon its own philosophical questions: Is this poetry? Can you see this *as* poetry? Can you meaningfully project the concept of "poetry" also onto *this?* What can you make sense of here? – the "wait and see" strategy means that you have shunned that invitation/challenge. You have relied upon some *other* authority, like "historical documents" or generations of professors" to tell you "what to think."[577] I think J.M. Bernstein's view on this matter is congruent both with Cavell and Brooks's when he writes: "Modernism opposes, to the last inch, any idea that what counts as an artwork is what is dubbed an art-

[574] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," pp. 188–189.
[575] With this I do not wish to imply that everyone should make up their own minds about some work of art, or piece of poetry *immediately* – or even that they should in principle be able to make up their own mind at all. You can of course withhold judgment when you feel unsure or not ready to make one. *With time*, you may of course become more accustomed to this particular work and in reading other works that are similar to it, you may start to get a grip of what it was and is. Slowly you grow to understand it better, bit by bit. However, this slow process still requires activity on your part. The kind of passiveness that is fraudulent in the "wait and see" strategy is one that puts the entire burden of judgment on others, and then accepts and takes on the outcome passively. It is not fraudulent to take one's time, and let a work grow on you.
[576] Tate, "Miss Emily and the Biographer," p. 17.
[577] Tate, "Understanding Modern Poetry," p. 158.

work or licensed by experts or museum practice as an artwork, or, in accordance with a regime of discursive practice, can be asserted as an artwork."[578]

Experts or professional institutions cannot tell you whether something is or is not poetry, they do not have the proper authority to do so, since what is up for grabs in the turmoil of modernism is not merely some technical or professional criteria of poetry, some technical definition, but instead the *grammatical* criteria of poetry. This can in turn present a way to understand Brooks's claim that professors of literature can fail to read poetry *as* poetry *because* (rather than despite the fact that) they are experts on the tradition of poetry: the bewilderment of the modernist situation can produce a sense of professional embarrassment – literary professors in the role of experts *should*, one might think, be able to assess new poetry. In such situations it can be tempting to become what, in chapter 3, I called *authoritarian*: to try to pose questions of grammatical criteria of poetry – which are *transitive* – as if they were questions of expertise criteria. However, such professional authority loses its validity when it is not connected with, and rooted in, the grammatical criteria of poetry. This means that *if* these experts do not try and find their feet in this new poetic situation (as the modernist poets have to), if they do not *actively* struggle to relate the new poetry to the tradition (and the old grammar) – and do not put their necks on the line by putting their own judgment above the parapet – they will become *fraudulent* in Cavell's sense and *passive*, incapable of reading poetry *as poetry*, in Brooks's terms. Toril Moi puts this point well when she discusses aesthetic judgment in the work of Cavell and Kant: "Good criticism requires a wide range of skills and knowledge. But what ever else it takes, criticism is always based on the critic's judgment. To make an aesthetic judgment, Kant claims, is to be willing to stake one's authority on nothing but one's own experience."[579] To me this sits very well also with Brooks, along with the stress too that Tate places on the necessary activity of the reader.

This in turn leads to a *fourth* significant similarity between Cavell and Brooks. Cavell's contends that "the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art" and that modernism on this point "only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art."[580] In both Cavell and Brooks one finds the idea that modernism only makes acute a condition of the understanding of art that has been there all along, something that is *always* present in our encounters with art, namely that ultimately you must *always* be *active* in Tate and Brooks's sense. In modernism this condition

[578] Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 94. Cavell also writes that this is to "put the critic's worth at the mercy of the history of taste; whereas his value to us is that he is able to make that history a part of his data, knowing that in itself, as it stands, it proves nothing – except popularity." Stanley Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," *Must We Mean What We Say?* p. 87.
[579] Moi, "The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir," p. 21.
[580] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 189.

becomes intensified because there are no longer stable criteria for the evaluation of art to fall back upon, but also in traditional art and in traditional poetry you must shoulder your own judgment and assess the poem yourself. That is the *only* way you can really judge, really know, whether the poem works aesthetically and what it actually means – even whether it means anything at all.

6.1.6. Fraudulence and "Proof" – Eastman as a Skeptical "Philistine"

In order to explain the imperative nature and authority of why one must "always" be *active* in criticism, and how moreover the shouldering of one's own judgment is the "only" way to assess the meaning and aesthetic accomplishment of poetry, I will turn now to Cavell's analysis of *aesthetic judgments*. I shall undertake this task while accounting for the second cul-de-sac that Cavell maps out in response to suspicions of fraudulence. As noted above, the first misguided strategy was to "wait and see" whether a work gets accepted as art by others (experts). What then of the second misguided strategy? It is to do as Eastman did: to demand some sort of *proof*. In accounting for this further false route Cavell also describes the role that "experts" may have on aesthetic matters if they cannot *tell* or *prove* to others that their assessments of art are valid.

In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," Cavell addresses the demand-a-proof-strategy by commenting on a story from *Don Quixote* – what can be referred to as the parable of the wine-tasters. In this story two relatives of Sancho Pancha who are considered to have good judgment in wine are called upon to give their opinions on a hogshead. Both wine-tasters approve of the wine but each has a small reservation: the first claims there is a small taste of *iron* in the wine while the second complains that one can detect a hint of *leather*. This divergence in critical conclusion gives rise to ridicule; their authority in wine tasting is questioned. However, when the hogshead is emptied, there is an old key with a leathern thong on the bottom of it![581]

Now, a way to *misconstrue* the moral of this story, Cavell writes, is the following: the discovery of the key with the leather thong finally *proved* that the wine tasters were both right and that the scorn and doubt they suffered as critics was unwarranted. There *was* indeed both leather and iron in the wine: the features the critics described were *there* all along and the key indeed proves the validity of their judgments.[582] But this would be to completely misunderstand what validates a critical claim, according to Cavell, and to misconstrue the logic and authority of aesthetic judgments. His response is

[581] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," pp. 86–87.
[582] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," pp. 86–88.

instead: "*all* that make the critic's expression of taste worth more than another man's is his ability to produce for himself the thong and key of his response; and his vindication comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there."[583] In making a judgment about art – like judging that X indeed *is* a poem, and that Y works poetically – neither "proof" nor experts can simply *tell* you how things really are, they cannot make the judgment *for* you. "Proof" cannot tell you, because the entire idea that one should demand anything like a "proof" on aesthetic matters is rooted in confusion: "it is not clear that the notion of 'proving it is (or is not) music [or poetry, or art]' is even intelligible, which means that it is not fully intelligible to say that nobody could do what it describes. (*What* can't anybody do here?)"[584]

To see why this is so, one should note the similarity between the logic of aesthetic judgment and the procedures of ordinary language philosophy here. Cavell writes that "the aesthetic judgment models the sort of claim entered by these philosophers, and that the familiar lack of conclusiveness in aesthetic argument, rather than showing up an irrationality, shows the kind of rationality it has, and needs."[585] One thing the aesthetic claim and argument share with the claim of "what we say when" is that both kind of claims can only be made, and tested "from the inside." "External," or empirical proof *cannot* be presented about these matters.[586] "The only exposure of false art lies in recognizing something about the object itself, but something whose recognition requires exactly the same capacity as recognizing the genuine article."[587] I think Richard Eldridge summarizes this point well when he writes:

> One cannot know in advance that the effort will come off well, and one may be taken in by something that fails to reward attention and to support animation. But there is also a chance that things will go well, that the material will repay one's trust in attending to its perplexities. All this is clearest in the encounter with difficult modern art, where the guiding sureties of tradition and genre are lost or attenuated. In criticism of the modern work of art, one undertakes to give articulate voice to the sources in the work of what has stopped, perplexed and attracted one, in the hope that one's responses to the work will be stabilized, confirmed and shared, at least by some. Absent such stabilizing, confirming, and sharing, my response may be mad, may isolate me from others and from myself.[588]

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[583] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 87.
[584] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 205.
[585] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 86.
[586] "Cannot" is here used in a *logical* and not an empirical sense; it is not as if there were a real "something," which we could have a coherent conception of, but which the critics for some reason cannot *execute*. It is simply not clear what would constitute "empirical proof."
[587] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," *Must We Mean What We Say?* p. 190.
[588] Richard Eldridge, "Criticism and the Risk of the Self: Stanley Cavell's Modernism and Elizabeth Bishop's," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, p. 93. Or as

Just as the only way to "test" if something makes sense or not in philosophy is by exercising the same capacity we always do when understanding meaning and language in general – i.e. that we try to make sense of it – the only way to expose fraudulence is to try out if we can or cannot see this particular thing *as* art. In both cases "you cannot tell from outside; and the expense in getting inside is a matter for each man to go over."[589] In both cases a *negative* result constitutes no conclusive proof that this is *not* art: "[P]hilosophy, like art, is, and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have."[590] This brings me to the related issue regarding why experts cannot tell us either. The reason they cannot is not that critics are unhelpful, unknowledgeable and undiscerning, or not worth listening to while you are making your judgment. Rather the reason is that, if you cannot see what they claim is there after you have received their interpretation, if you cannot taste the iron and leather in the wine *yourself*, you still do not know if it is there.

You may of course trust those critics and have good reason to do so even if you cannot see what they see. But if you cannot see what they see you lack the requisite authority to back up their claims. The proof, as they say, is in the pudding – or in the case of the wine-tasters, in the possibilities of taste that the connoisseurs's verdicts open up for us as we drink the wine. The critic's authority lies in his or her capacity to make us *taste*, through his or her interpretation, the key and thong. But the critic cannot *force* a reader who is unwilling or unable to sense it. Just as the wine taster cannot prove that the taste really *is* there in the wine, the literary interpreter cannot prove that the sense or aesthetic value he or she claims to find in a poem *is* there. What validates the interpreter's claim is what he or she can make us *see* in the poem.

This moral, I think, brings out a *fifth* important similarity between Brooks and Cavell, namely that both reject the (logical) possibility of there being something like a "proof" of the matter – that is, a proof that a poem is a poem, or that it is meaningful. In fact – it is, I will suggest, in this light that one ought to read Brooks's claim that it is *the reader* that should assume the "burden of proof" in the encounter with difficult modernist poetry.[591] The fact that Brooks uses the word "proof" here is merely a verbal matter and does not cause any inconsistency in his view. By the end of "What Does Poetry Communicate?" he writes of his own interpretation: "If my clumsy

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Espen Hammer writes: "A good art critic is engaged in honestly articulating his or her own experience, and in so doing in tracing the degree of attunement and commonality there might be between herself and others. The art critic, like the philosopher of ordinarily language, while establishing the vertical relation to the object, at the same time explores the horizontal depth of our mutual alignment, our agreement in judgments." Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 96.

[589] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 209.

[590] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 96.

[591] Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" p. 76.

paraphrase possesses any part of the truth, then this is still another thing which the poem communicates, though I shall hardly be able to 'prove' it."[592] Instead, the reader has to make up his or her own mind whether the interpretive paraphrase is appropriate or not. Eastman, in refusing to shoulder that burden of responsibility by principally rejecting the new poetry, becomes thereby a fraudulent philistine in Cavell's sense.

What all these similarities suggest, I think, is that there are important affinities here between, on the one hand, the authority and logic of Cavell's appeal to "what we say when" and aesthetic judgment and, on the other, the authority and logic of *close reading* – especially with respect to charges of fraudulence and one's possible responses to such accusations. In the next section I will clarify these similarities further.[593]

6.1.7. The Authority and Logic of Aesthetic Judgment, "What We Say When," and Close Reading

The similarity in authority and logic between Cavell's philosophical appeal to "what we say when" and the authority and logic of New Critical close reading, is briefly but lucidly discussed by Richard Eldridge in his *Literature, Life and Modernity* (2008). Eldridge makes the connection by comparing the sense of "we" or "us" invoked in these two contexts when he writes:

> "We" […] is meant to be improvisatory and invitational: to invite others to share in and test a thought for themselves. […] This invitational (philosophical) usage of "we" traces back at least to Socrates. […] This same usage of "we" appears in ordinary language philosophy when what we say is investigated. […] Once upon a time, perhaps in the heyday of New Criticism, poetry was read in something like this spirit, that is, with attention to "how we are moved" by the poem, how "we" follow its sense etc.[594]

I think Eldridge is absolutely correct in establishing this connection. He then goes on to write that "[s]ince the end of that heyday, it has been 'discovered' that not everyone either interprets or responds to a given poem (to any poem) in the same way."[595] As a result of this "discovery," not least through the influence of Cultural Studies, "the study of literature has become an increas-

[592] Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" p. 72.
[593] I should probably add that when I speak of the "logic of close reading" here, I am not referring to close reading in the stricter sense of an academic *method* which inherently looks for, say, ambiguities and paradoxes. I am not even considering it as necessitating a disregard for authorial intention. I focus on what I take is the most central feature in Brooks's way of *doing* interpretations, that is, the kind of authority this reading appeals to in practice, and how this practice constitutes an alternative to the way of relying on external authorities which he and Tate criticize.
[594] Eldridge, *Literature, Life and Modernity*, p. 24.
[595] Eldridge, *Literature, Life and Modernity*, p. 24.

ingly sociologized enterprise," according to Eldridge.[596] In the eyes of those participating in such an enterprise, it may seem less prejudicial to study "in a systematic, empirical, nondoctrinaire way [the 'we'] who in actual fact says (and feels) what when."[597] Acknowledging that such empirical investigations indeed offer "interesting and important results," Eldridge contends that "[i]t would by no means be an obvious advance to go back to the smugness and staleness of certain forms of New Criticism without having these other kinds of critical, cultural investigations also going on."[598]

Now, while I think Eldridge is right in admitting the fruitfulness of sociological approaches to literature, and the enrichment of literary studies to which Cultural and Critical Studies have themselves contributed, I think this negative depiction of New Criticism (even when tempered by the reservation "of certain forms of") slightly misrepresents the problematic at hand: it unwittingly fuels a false conflict.

There is no reason to suggest an either-or situation here, as if literary studies would have to pick sides whether to do close readings or literary sociology. It obviously has room for both, and, as the New Formalists have recently convincingly demonstrated, I think, there is a spectrum of fruitful ways in which the two approaches can be combined. As Fredric Bogel writes in *New Formalist Criticism*:

> [C]lose reading can function as a powerful and integral part of any sort of critical analysis, including those contextual or ideological or political modes of criticism that eschew close readings as a decadent, aestheticizing distraction from power and Realpolitik. […] If you want to discover covert colonial bias in a professedly anticolonial novel, why rely on the flimsiness of paraphrase, refusing the aid of an analytical strategy that can disclose and minutely anatomize such bias at the level of grammar and syntax, vocabulary, and figures of speech? If you are working out a psychoanalytic reading of a poem or story or private correspondence, aren't details of language the place where the mysteries of the psyche get most intricately and profoundly performed? And even if, in a more historical and sociological vein, you are exploring the socially educative or socially coercive ways didactic novels attempt to shape female readership in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, aren't the overt rules, maxims, and exemplary scenes in such novels only a starting point for analysis?[599]

I do not think Eldridge is underwriting such a false conflict. Nonetheless, he risks giving such a separation unwanted support when he reproduces the very misunderstanding of New Criticism that his comparison between close reading and philosophical appeals to "what we say when" so successfully *countered*. In my view it is rather the case that close reading can indeed *ap-*

[596] Eldridge, *Literature, Life and Modernity*, p. 25.
[597] Eldridge, *Literature, Life and Modernity*, p. 25.
[598] Eldridge, *Literature, Life and Modernity*, p. 25.
[599] Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism*, pp. 33–34.

pear as something the sociologically conscious critic must *oppose* – as something "smug" and "stale," not to say conservative, class-, race- and gender- biased – something which needs to be *replaced* with literary sociology. But it only appears that way if the "we" to which a given close reading makes its appeal is not understood as an *invitation*, as I think it should, but as the same kind of "we" that the sociologists are working with – a "we" of factual empirical readers. Of course specific New Critical close readings (as well as specific sociological studies) can be conservative, biased, and exclusionary – and when they are they should be exposed as such – but close reading is not inherently any of these things.

Since I think Eldridge is right to see the New Critical "we" as an *invitational* "we" on a par with the philosophical "we" of Cavell's, this also means that the validity of the claim that "we" see something *as* something in a close reading is not proved or disproved by counting the noses of readers who agree or disagree with "our" interpretation. If 50% of all readers thought Gertrude Stein's poetry made sense and 50% did not would that *make* Stein's poetry 50% sense and 50% nonsense? Hardly. It is not a question that can be determined through the casting of *votes*. This kind of claim, just like the philosophical claim of "what we say when," is instead awaiting acknowledgement – it is vulnerable to acknowledgement.[600] And that *invitation* can be rejected and the acknowledgement of the interpretive claim can be withheld. Rejections of the interpretive claim do not *prove* that the "we" was an (ideological) "illusion" all along. Instead it shows the sort of logic and authority this invitational "we" possesses.[601] This way of conceptualizing close reading depends of course on me downplaying its role as a very *specific* academic reading-method (looking for ambiguities, paradoxes, avoiding

[600] J.M. Bernstein writes lucidly on this matter in *Against Voluptuous Bodies*: "Here then is the curious pivot of such [aesthetic] judgments: they claim objectivity, they aim to speak with a 'universal voice,' for everyone, and thus demand that others see things the same way. Yet there is no matter of fact or reason (no concept or principle that my judgment comes under) that grounds any such judgment and thus empirically or logically necessitates that others make the same judgment. Because there are no ultimate grounds for judgment, retreat is possible; because retreat is possible, the judgments themselves may appear somehow systematically vulnerable, and because vulnerable, not really objective (rational and cognitive) but merely psychological. […] Cavell wants to assert that the import of such judgments is proportional to their vulnerability: it is because such claims are universal but incapable of proof that they have the relevance they do." Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 85.

[601] I think Eldridge would agree with me on this. He and Bernard Rhie make more or less this point – though not while discussing New Criticism and close reading – in their introduction to *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies* while contesting the misapprehension that Cavell's appeal to "what we say when" would be covertly "ideological in nature, arbitrarily invoking some imagined community's customs as a fixed standard." Instead, they stress that this philosophical appeal is made when "the existence of any 'we' is in doubt, and claims to 'what we say' are by their very nature vulnerable" and that "when they work at all, by effecting a liberating transformation" then a "new or transformed 'we' is composed or revealed." I would say that the same goes for close reading too. See Eldridge and Rhie, "Introduction: Cavell, Literary Studies, and the Human Subject: Consequences of Skepticism," p. 4.

authorial intentions, etc.) and rather placing general emphasis both on the intricate interdependence of form and content as well as on the reader's own responsibility for sense making: that one must look and see.[602]

If I am permitted to recover the logic of close reading in this way then it becomes clear that Brooks's response to Eastman's charges of nonsensicality resembles in an important way Cavell's own reply to charges of fraudulence leveled at modernist art. Both first and foremost issue a *practical* response.[603] When Cavell points out that the assessment of a critical claim has to be tested by each singular reader, and that neither history nor experts can tell us if there is iron and leather in the wine, one should note how similar this view is to Brooks's claim that no *a priori* principle can tell us in advance whether or not something works aesthetically, that "[e]ach figure must be dealt with separately and individually."[604] Moreover, when Cavell writes that the "only exposure of false art lies in recognizing something about the object itself, but something whose recognition requires exactly the same capacity as recognizing the genuine article,"[605] I think one should hear how well it resonates with Brooks's claim that "the best defence against the charge of unintelligibility is to submit detailed interpretations" of the poems under suspicion.[606] Both Cavell and Brooks agree, then, that the best defense against suspicions of fraudulence is to treat any poem arousing suspicion in the same way we would engage with any poetry in criticism: that is, we should try to get inside it by interpreting it.

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[602] To do so is not uncommon, as Andrew Dubois points out in "Ethics, Critics, Close Reading": "Of the aspects of New Criticism assimilated and used by ethically minded literary critics without being overly beholden or overly resistant to them, close reading is the example of most importance. […] The term is New Critical jargon that has come to be used more generally at the same time that it retains its history, which is to say, its New Critical birthright." Andrew Dubois, "Ethics, Critics, Close Reading," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Summer 2007), p. 931. One can of course pick up other aspects, and highlight other parts of the New Critical tradition in the analysis and employment of the term "close reading." One very interesting example is Joshua Gang who via the intellectual roots of I.A. Richards argues that close reading can also be linked to a kind of mechanical behaviorism. I find Gang's argument convincing – though more as an analysis of certain strands in the tradition of New Critical theoretical conceptions than as an analysis of close reading and its logic as a practical activity. I will in fact be making a similar argument – though not with regard to close reading and behaviorism but with respect to Brooks's theory of poetic meaning and the residue of logical positivism in I.A. Richards (see 6.2.3.)

[603] I think R.M. Berry is right when he states that "[f]or Cavell, the problem of modernist poetry is practical, a problem of how anyone who sees the point of using words in these ways can get others to see it, too." R.M. Berry, "'Is "Us" Me?' Cultural Studies and the Universality of Aesthetic Judgments," *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies*, p. 38

[604] Brooks, "Metaphor and the Tradition," p. 25.

[605] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 190.

[606] Brooks, "Preface," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, pp. xi–x.

6.1.8. Cavell and Brooks on Modernism, Criticism and Privacy

What all this shows, I think, is that the problem Cavell calls the problem of "fraudulence" in art and criticism does not itself constitute aesthetic or poetic skepticism. Rather, it testifies to one of the "truths" of aesthetic and poetic skepticism, namely that sometimes we do indeed not know whether something is or is not art or poetry. This in turn means that fraudulence is a *real* risk in art and criticism. Before I leave the skeptical charges of Eastman behind there are two more "truths" of poetic skepticism I wish to discuss in relation to Brooks and Cavell. The first concerns the charge of *privacy* and the risks and difficulties of "getting inside" modernist poetry. The second concerns a connection that Cavell draws between metaphoricity and skepticism. It might be slightly misleading to call these *different* problems or "truths" of poetic skepticism, because they are intimately related. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity, I will treat them successively.

I begin with the tripartite relation between modernism, interpretation and privacy. Based on what I have written so far, one could ask whether the stress on the individual aesthetic judgment implies that if *no one* acknowledges my interpretation, I should not worry about it but calmly reassure myself that I have autonomously executed my literary judgment. I can, to go back to the earlier example, taste the iron and the leather myself, so in that case, why cannot this be the end of the matter? This, though, is not Cavell's view. In "Music Discomposed," he writes:

> It matters that others know what I see, in a way it does not matter whether they know my tastes. It matters, there is a burden, because unless I can tell what I know, there is a suggestion (and to myself as well) that I do *not* know. But I *do* – what I see is *that* (pointing to the object). But for that to communicate, you have to see it too. Describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it. Art is often praised because it brings men together. But it also separates them.[607]

It *does* matter that I succeed in making others see what I see. If I do not, there will linger a suspicion that I merely imagined it there. But if experts cannot tell or prove to a reader what is there, then what role does the critic serve? Again I think one should recall the *invitational* status and authority the critic's interpretation has: "in art, the chances you take are your own. But of course you are inviting others to take them with you. And since they are, nevertheless, your own, and your invitation is based not on power or authority, but on attraction and promise."[608] In making an interpretation I *invite* you to see what I see. But in doing that, I also *claim* that what I see and express is something *we* should be able to see in the poem. But if no one admits to see what I see, my claim to community has not been answered. The commu-

[607] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 193.
[608] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 199.

nity sharing my understanding may turn out to be very small, it may in fact only be inhabited by me. This problem allows me now to turn to Cavell's discussion of modernism's relation to privacy, intimacy, and isolation.

In tying together the modernist stage of art forms with philosophy and skepticism, Cavell also describes the desire for *intimacy* in art. He writes: "I want to say that with the birth of skepticism, hence of modern philosophy, a new intimacy, or wish for it, enters the world; call it privacy shared (not shared with the public, but from it)."[609] I take this desire for shared privacy to be particularly relevant for an understanding of what is at stake in modernist literature – and what is at stake for criticism in and after modernism – and why modernist literature, when enigmatic, can be so provoking and alienating for some of its readers.

If the idea is to communicate the very thing that seems hardest express in and through language, the risk of failure will also be substantial. If it is *privacy* that should be shared, and, as Cavell puts it, "not shared with the public, but from it," then there will be an issue not only about *what* the modernist author will be able to express, but also *who* he or she will be able (or willing) to address. Here one may refer to the words of Ortega y Gasset:

> All modern art is unpopular, and it is so not accidentally and by chance, but essentially and by fate. […] The works of the romanticists were the first, after the invention of printing, to enjoy large editions. Romanticism was the prototype of a popular style. First-born of democracy, it was coddled by the masses. Modern art, on the other hand, will always have the masses against it. It is essentially unpopular. […] It divides the public into two groups: one very small, formed by those who are favorably inclined towards it; another very large – the hostile majority. [610]

Brooks and Eastman have already noted some reasons why the majority may remain hostile: that modernism can seem "irresponsible," or that the poet appears too self-indulgent, not really trying to communicate with us, but rather seeking to dominate us with his or her exclusive, idiosyncratic, esoteric meanings. This need not even be phrased as a *critique* but can take the form of a standard description of modernism in literary history.[611] Indeed

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[609] Cavell, "Introduction," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 21.

[610] José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Notes on The Novel* (1925) transl. Helene Weyl (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1948), pp. 4–5.

[611] As one can read in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*: "In the later works of the modernists, history came to have idiosyncratic meanings; the modernists were often attracted to mystical systems of world history – Yeats's gyres, Pound's vortex, Joyce's Vichian cycles. They built their major works on such models, and although the historical details of each model […] were frequently bizarre, the models themselves provided images and symbols for their poetry. All these models tend to emphasize the current moment as one of crisis, either preparing for or recovering from a radical break in history." Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sãu Paulo, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 146–147.

Tate has a similar contention: "[T]oday many poets are driven to inventing private languages, or very narrow ones, because public speech has been heavily tainted with mass feeling. Mass language is the medium of 'communication'."[612] Linking modern poetry to the tradition also in this respect, Brooks adds that "privacy and obscurity, to some degree, are inevitable in all poetry."[613]

This in turn constitutes a *sixth* similarity between Cavell and Brooks. In a passage quite similar to that of Ortega y Gasset's, Cavell writes:

> [T]he major modernist works of the past century at least […] [are] logically speaking, esoteric. That is, such works seek to split their audience into insiders and outsiders (and split each member of it); hence they create the particular unpleasantness of cults (at best as a specific against the particular unpleasantness of indifference or intellectual promiscuousness, combating partialness by partiality); hence demand for their sincere reception the shock of conversion.[614]

The "split" of which Cavell speaks, is not, I take it, one between some small aesthetic, aristocratic, clique on the one hand, and "the masses" on the other, it is not necessarily a split between the exclusive and the popular. The split is between insiders and outsiders in a *logical* and *aesthetic sense*. It is a split between those who claim to have found something understandable and aesthetically striking in the "esoteric" work, and those that simply cannot. Furthermore, it is a split that can occur in one and the same person over time, thus the "shock of conversion."

The unpleasantness of cults that Cavell here speaks of is, I assume, the unpleasantness of *uncritical devotion*, something which is *especially* unpleasant when found in philosophers and critics, who both trade in exercising their own, individual, *critical* judgment, just like the modernist writer. So the suspicion that the modernist writers, and their supporters and enthusiasts, are part of a *cult* – as Eastman's purported "cult of unintelligibility" attests to – is in effect a suspicion that these enthusiasts are no longer exercising their critical judgment, its is a suspicion of *fraudulence*.

This split is *real*, however, and therefore I find it rather touching, when Eastman does not simply accuse the modernists of being willfully nonsensical and fraudulent, but describes the sense of alienation he feels while facing them:

> [W]hen modernist critics object to Mr. Cummins's poems that they are too lucid – "they do not present the eternal difficulties that make poems immortal" – *I can only bow and retire. I do not live in that world.* When they object

[612] Tate, "Tension in Poetry," p. 57.
[613] Cleanth Brooks, "Symbolist Poetry and the Ivory Tower," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. 68.
[614] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. xx.

> to the established punctuation of Shakespeare because it "restricts his meaning to special interpretations of special words," and say that "if we must choose any one meaning, then we owe it to Shakespeare to choose… one embracing as many meanings as possible, that is, the most difficult meaning," *I feel they have never touched the mind of Shakespeare*. And when they describe one of the great sonnets, punctuated in a manner they consider, on very flimsy evidence, to be Shakespeare's own, as "a furiously dynamic crossword puzzle which can be read in many directions at once," *I feel I am confronted with beings of a different species*.[615]

As Cavell said: "Art is often praised because it brings men together. But it also separates them."[616] Eastman's reaction to his sense of "not liv[ing] in that world" is, however, to demand the iron key with the leather thong! – either from the critic or from the poet – that will unlock the door to that world. If he does not get *that* – the *proof* – he refuses to believe in *the existence* of such a world. There cannot be such a world if he cannot enter it. But the problem is that "the key" does not work on the Cartesian level of existence/inexistence or reality/unreality, or truth/falsity – rather it operates, on the Kantian conceptual level of logic, criteria and sense. Therefore if Eastman is to enter and make sense of that world – and if not always by *finding* a key himself, since one can occasionally receive help with that particular task, as I shall return to shortly – then he must at least be able to *turn* the key while reading. In a passage where he is discussing what can rid us of suspicions of fraudulence, Cavell writes something that fits Eastman's predicament beautifully:

> What ought to make the experience [of fraudulence] go away? Further experience, or else nothing; entering the new world of these objects, understanding them not in theory but as objects of art, in the sense in which we have always, when we have ever, understood such objects. […] [I]f I cannot in that way enter their world, I do not know what interest, if any at all, I would have in them.[617]

Besides "further experience" I would like to add "helpful criticism." For, it is not as if we are entirely without help, in the form of rational and lucid interpretations and critical arguments that can assist us in unlocking hermetic poetry. I think Bernstein puts this point well when he writes:

> Aesthetic arguments are possible. I can give reasons for my claims, offer evidence, provide analogies from like cases, construct a narrative linking the work under consideration to what preceded it, and so try to make its features more intelligible. […] [W]ithout these, without the relevant body of criticism,

[615] Eastman, "The Cult of Unintelligibility," p. 72. My italics.
[616] Cavell, "Music Discomposed," p. 193.
[617] Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," p. 215.

> interpretation, and history, aesthetic discourse and judgment would be impossible (unrecognizable).[618]

A good critic can be essential when we are trying to find such keys, and indispensable for changing our experience of poems. This is one of the great benefits with skilled critics: they are assistant key finders, and – to add another metaphor – ladder builders. They provide us with ladders with which we can climb into a poem we first could not make anything of, or, at best, could only make a little meaningful. In fact the metaphor of the ladder is very apt in this case: if we cannot on our own take that giant leap into the poem with which we would *in one step* be able to see it as a continuation of poetry, the skilled critic may provide us with those *intermediate* and *incremental steps*, which, one after another, helps us arrive at a place in which this case, this new projection, can be seen as a new instance of poetry. This in turn brings out another similarity between Cavell's grammatico-philosophical reminders, on the one hand, and literary interpretations, on the other: once we have used a ladder we can, so to speak, kick it away; that is, once an interpretation has enabled us to climb into a poem and see it from a certain viewpoint, we will not need to reread the interpretation over and over again to continue to understand the poem. We can ourselves see it that way from then on.[619]

But even if we are given an excellent ladder, *we* must in turn be willing and able to do the climbing ourselves. Not all readers will need the same kind of ladder, in fact not all readers will accept the ladder as a ladder. In order then to find a key to a poem, we must thus be willing to in some sense trust the work, and trust the critic; we ought to have an active and open attitude that does not foreclose the possibility of finding it. For sure, not everyone will be able to do it.

When Brooks writes: "If my clumsy paraphrase possesses any part of the truth, then this is still another thing which the poem communicates, though I

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[618] Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 85.

[619] The possible "ingratitude" inbuilt in this condition is of course that if the critic is *very* successful, we may have the feeling that his or her interpretation was "obvious" – anyone could have seen *that* in the text. One reason why it is good to encourage students to always read the poem before they read the interpretation, is of course that they will then have a better chance of getting an impression of their own first, without being too influenced by a (good or bad) interpretation from the very beginning. Another reason, though, is, I think, that they (we) will then have a better chance to appreciate *the work* of the good critic. To be justly thankful for the ladder the interpreter has provided us with. The metaphor of the ladder has its origin in Wittgenstein: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. C.K. Ogden, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell (Mineola New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999) (1922/1955), §6.54, p. 108.

shall hardly be able to 'prove' it,"[620] I think he touches upon the same grammatical point that Cavell makes in the following quote:

> It is essential to making an aesthetic judgment that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don't you see, don't you hear, don't you dig? The best critic will know the best points. Because if you do not see *something,* without explanation, then there is nothing further to discuss. Which does not mean that the critic has no recourse: he can start training and instructing you and preaching at you – a direction in which criticism invariably will start to veer. […] At some point, the critic will have to say: This is what I see. Reasons – at definite points, for definite reasons, in different circumstances – come to an end. (Cf. *Investigations*, §217.)[621]

Beyond interpretation (and the possible developments of it) and away from direct appeal to the text, one reaches a point in which there is nothing left for the critic to do. At such a point it is up to the reader to do the rest. The interpreter's arguments and resources come to an end and at that point we can either use his or her interpretive ladder or we cannot. At some point we must be able to take the intermediate steps of the interpreter's ladder ourselves, judge ourselves whether those smaller steps, in turn, can carry us into the poem. We must judge (on our own) whether we can make those projections work by trying them out. Not everyone will be able to take even these smaller, intermediate, steps. And we might not always agree on which ones are valid, which actually hold our weight. But so long as we are able to "see something, without explanation" there is no pre-set limit regarding how much more we are able to see *with* explanation, with interpretation. I suggest that it is in this *practical* light that the "method" of close reading should be viewed.

6.1.9. The Skeptical and the Metaphorical: Unnatural Repudiation and Unnatural Intensification of Our Common Criteria

Thus far I have compared Brooks's discussion of modernism and poetry with Cavell's discussion of modernism, art and fraudulence. I have argued that both thinkers respond to aesthetic and poetic skepticism, and do so by proposing first of all *practical* responses to suspicions of fraudulence. However, there is one final point of interest regarding skepticism and poetry that needs accounting for. It requires that one looks not only at Cavell's discussion of art and modernist art but, more specifically, at his discussion of metaphorici-

[620] Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" pp. 72–73.
[621] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 93. Also: "If I have exhausted justification I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'" Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 217, p. 72e.

ty. This will help also to bring out what I take to be a third "truth" of poetic skepticism.

In a postscript to "Being Odd, Getting Even. (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," Cavell proposes, and quite surprisingly one might think, that there exists an intimate relation between *metaphors* and *skepticism*. According to Cavell what metaphorical and skeptical language use share is that neither is fully *natural*. The unnaturalness of metaphors is something Cavell discusses already in *The Claim of Reason.* At the end of "Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language" he writes: "what is essential to the projection of a word is that it proceeds, or can be made to proceed, *naturally*; what is essential to a functioning metaphor is that its 'transfer' is *unnatural* – it breaks up the established, normal directions of projection."[622] The *naturalness* of our projections in our shared language is something that both our ordinary everyday communication and one's philosophical appeal to "what we say when" rely upon. In chapters 2 and 3, I discussed what happens to the skeptic when he or she tries to express the skeptical "doubt": he or she repudiates our common criteria, which simultaneously ends up in a failure to mean coherently, that is, it results in a failure to project words *meaningfully*. It leads the skeptic into covert nonsense. In "Postscript C," Cavell writes:

> What makes skepticism unnatural is its occasion for coming to repudiate our criteria for applying the concepts of our language to anything; repudiating, I call this, our attunement with one another, a repudiation Wittgenstein calls our (being led to be) speaking outside language games. This begins in casualness but it continues in drivenness and hauntedness, finding rest (such as it will be) in a particular structure (of absolute "see-ables," fixed perspectives, decontextualized, or depersonalized, "meanings") from within which language seems a prison, or wasteland.[623]

Now, this similarity in unnaturalness between skeptical nonsense and poetic metaphors can sound deeply unsettling. In the quote above I am also tempted to hear an uncanny literary allusion: is the skeptical picture of language as a "wasteland" meant to invoke in us the image of one of the most central poetical works of literary modernism, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*?[624] I would not deny that *The Waste Land* is fittingly described as thematizing a lived skeptical, existential predicament. This is indeed how Brooks interprets the poem in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. He writes that Eliot's poem explores how "[t]he fact that men have lost the knowledge of good and evil, keeps them from being alive, and is the justification for viewing the modern

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[622] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 190.

[623] Stanley Cavell, "Postscript C: The Skeptical and the Metaphorical," postscript to "Being Odd, Getting Even. (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," *In Quest of the Ordinary*, p. 147.

[624] If so, an equally obvious allusion is, as Professor Torsten Pettersson pointed out to me, Fredric Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language*, Princeton Essays in Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

waste land as a realm in which the inhabitants *do not even exist*."[625] But the allusion, if it is there, may give the impression that metaphors – and thus a huge amount of poetry – dangerously border on nonsense. This impression is seemingly strengthened if one looks at the following comments made by Cavell on Wittgenstein and figurative meaning in *The Claim of Reason*:

> I remark, in passing, that the concept of figurative meaning – Wittgenstein sometimes calls it secondary meaning – declares that investigation of this region cannot proceed always by employing language-games and the (a priori) agreement in judgment upon which they depend. Because with figurative meaning there is no such antecedent agreement. You could say that words used in such connections have no grammar – and that would itself be a grammatical remark. A reflection of this lack of common agreement here is the number of technical concepts Wittgenstein introduces in the course of these pages, e.g., secondary meaning, picture-face, aspects, aspect-blindness.[626]

Figurative meaning has no grammar, these regions of language cannot always be explored by appeals to pre-existent language games or agreement in judgment because they lack antecedent agreement in judgment – does this not sound awfully much like meaning skepticism about poetry? Have we not parted company with Eastman yet?

But this is not what Cavell is in fact suggesting, because even if metaphors and figurative language *do* outstrip criteria and antecedent judgment and language games, the *way* they do so are different from the cases where the skeptic repudiates our criteria. With metaphors criteria are not repudiated, rather they are *expanded*:

> What makes metaphor unnatural is its occasion to transcend our criteria; not as if to repudiate them, as if they are arbitrary; but to expand them, as though they are contracted. (The ordinary [or Wittgensteinian] grammar of "sun" must be preserved if the metaphorical application of it to Juliet is to carry; for example, the criteria for its rising and setting and its being obscured or eclipsed and its causing growth and thirst, and for its shining as something that, in creating day, hence night, lights the moon as well as the earth.) And metaphor transcends criteria not as if to repudiate our mutual attunement but as if to pressure this attunement (under which pressure certain of our attunements with others will fail; but with certain others our attunement will be intensified and refined). In the realm of the figurative, our words are not felt as confining but as releasing, or not as binding but as bonding. (This realm is neither outside nor inside language games.)[627]

[625] Cleanth Brooks, "The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. 139. My italics.
[626] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 355.
[627] Cavell, "Postscript C: The Skeptical and the Metaphorical," pp. 147–148.

I take this to imply that the leaps made in the projections of metaphors are, as it were, *longer*, *riskier*, and sometimes therefore also *deeper*, than our ordinary, "natural" ones. They can be, in Virginia Woolf's words, "dizzy and dangerous leap[s]" which make the reader feel like "an acrobat flying precariously from bar to bar, […] spinning madly through mid-air."[628] But they can also reveal something of the specific and intricate structure of the speaker's inner world as well as his or her personal sense of how reality hangs together. I propose that this description of unnatural metaphors should be compared with Brooks's idea that poetry, in a sense, violates ordinary meanings: "The poet, within limits, has to make up his language as he goes. […] The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating their dictionary meanings."[629]

This is a *seventh* similarity between Brooks and Cavell: to follow such a projection successfully is to enter a deeper form of communicational and aesthetic *intimacy*. But as the pressure of this attunement in words is intensified, fewer will be able to share it. This is of course related to the discussion of privacy in modernism in the last section, a relation which becomes even clearer if one views Cavell's characterization of metaphor in the light of Brooks's stress on the modernists's (and the metaphysical poets's) bold use of metaphors in poetry.[630] It is in light of this attempt at poetic precision and intimate understanding that I think one should read Brooks's critique of Eastman's suspicion "that the symbolist poet is deliberately trying to exclude the mass of people from participation in his poetry."[631] Instead, Brooks suggests:

> [A] more accurate statement would be this: The symbolist poet refuses to sacrifice the subtlety and complexity of his total vision of reality. Such a poetry will undoubtedly result in limitation of the audience, but the limitation will

[628] Woolf writes the following about the Georgian writers, among them T.S. Eliot, in a situation where authors (and readers) cannot rely on previously established literary conventions and tools: "Their sincerity is desperate, and their courage tremendous; it is only that they do not know which to use, a fork or their fingers. […] I think that Mr Eliot has written some of the loveliest lines in modern poetry. […] As I sun myself upon the intense and ravishing beauty of one of his lines, and reflect that I must make a dizzy and dangerous leap to the next, and so on from line to line, like an acrobat flying precariously from bar to bar, I cry out, I confess, for the old decorums, and envy the indolence of my ancestors who, instead of spinning madly through mid-air, dreamt quietly in the shade with a book." Virginia Woolf, pp. 51–52.

[629] Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," p. 9.

[630] Robert Chodat, to my mind convincingly, proposes that this kind of effort to *extend* intimacy is characteristic not only of modernism but also of realism and that modernism should be seen as a continuation of realism in that regard: "Though still often contrasted with 'realism,' Modernist experiments can often be understood as *extending* novelistic realism […] in order to better limn modernity's distinctive experiences […]; the interior monologues of Joyce and Woolf are partly meant to convey the shapelessness of the world and our mental lives." Robert Chodat, "Empiricism, Exhaustion, and Meaning What We Say: Cavell and Contemporary Fiction," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies,* p. 209.

[631] Brooks, "Symbolist Poetry and the Ivory Tower," p. 67.

> be an unfortunate necessity conditioned by the nature of the poetry, not the effect of the poet's personal snobbery.[632]

Once more I would like to stress that whoever is "inside" and "outside" this realm of poetic intimacy is not determined *solely* by what we are able to do and see *ourselves* as we encounter the poem. It is not as if the authentic execution of my own judgment would necessitate that I had exercised it *in isolation* from others, as if their judgment would be irrelevant to, or threaten, the integrity of my own. We can help each other to take these longer leaps, by, so to say, breaking up that long leap of a metaphor into smaller intermediate leaps of interpretive paraphrases. It is not as if the metaphor simply could be analyzed *down* to those interpretive paraphrases, but because the "unnatural" projection of the metaphor is still *parasitic* on the natural projections of its words.[633]

However, along with the chance of intimacy and deeply shared meaning there is also the risk of alienation and muteness: not everyone will "get it" – with or without the aid of interpretive paraphrases. To alienated readers, like Eastman, the poetry will appear no less nonsensical than the language of the skeptic. These usages of language are, as Cavell writes, subtle but fragile:

> [R]egions of a word's use which cannot be assured or explained by an appeal to its ordinary language games […] [,] [s]uch uses have consequences in the kind of understanding and communication they make possible. I want to say: It is such shades of sense, intimations of meaning, which allow certain kinds of subtlety or delicacy of communication; the connection is intimate, but fragile. Persons who cannot use words, or gestures, in these ways with you may yet be of your world, but perhaps not of your flesh.[634]

What skepticism and metaphors share is indeed their transgression of our ordinary community in criteria. But where the skeptic's transgression constitutes a withdrawal from, and an avoidance of, the community in language and its claim upon me, the metaphor's transgression takes the form of *intensification*, pressing our sharedness in language further, pushing it to new depths. The claim of the metaphor is thus not only a claim to community – its ambitions are higher than that – it is a claim to *intimacy*. And as such it can be rejected or acknowledged. In that way the metaphor becomes emblematic of poetry as such.

For critics, the form that acknowledgment takes – the form that is expected and required – *is the form of an interpretation*. The interpretation is in

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[632] Brooks, "Symbolist Poetry and the Ivory Tower," p. 67.
[633] "To give the paraphrase, to understand the metaphor, I must understand the ordinary or dictionary meaning of the words it contains, *and* understand that they are not there being used in their ordinary way, that the meanings they invite are not to be found opposite them in a dictionary." Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 79.
[634] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* p. 189.

turn a claim to community (or even intimacy) that faces in two directions: it faces the poem, and it faces the reader. At the heart of interpretation lies the hope of bringing the poem and the reader closer together. That is also, I have argued, Brooks's main and most successful response to Eastman's "charge of unintelligibility": *close reading*.

Since *The Waste Land* was (possibly) alluded to by Cavell in relation to skepticism and metaphors – and since metaphors are considered by Brooks to be at the heart of poetry, particularly central for modernist poetry – and since Eliot's poem was one of the central pieces that Eastman claimed to be hidden nonsense – I would like to end this first part of chapter 6 by commenting on a passage from Brooks's close reading of *The Waste Land* in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. What Brooks writes in the following passage expresses, I think, how *The Waste Land* can – if Brooks's interpretation is acknowledged and accepted – also affect the conception of modernist poetry as a whole.

> *The Waste Land* has been almost consistently misinterpreted since its first publication. […] But more than the meaning of one poem is at stake. If *The Waste Land* is not a world-weary cry of despair or sighing after the vanished glories of the past, then not only the popular interpretation of the poem will have to be altered, but also the general interpretations of post-war poetry which begin with such a misinterpretation as a premise.[635]

Brooks is here treating *The Waste Land* precisely as what I have called an interpretive *hard case*. In constituting a *modernist* interpretive hard case, the fate of *The Waste Land* – how and whether we acknowledge its status as poetry and what meaning (if any) we admit it to have – can affect the entire view of post-war poetry, Brooks claims. It can change our view of the tradition and our criteria of poetry. Reading Brooks's "The Waste land: Critique of the Myth" will of course not relieve the reader of the burden of interpreting *The Waste Land* him- or herself. But by *actively* reading both Eliot's poem *and* Brooks's interpretation, the reader is hopefully in a better position to assess the poem (and Brooks's interpretation of it). What Brooks can offer is a ladder, a key. The question of whether one can climb the ladder, and the turn the key, is for each reader to find out for him- or herself.

6.1.10. Aesthetic Skepticism and Poetic Skepticism

In this first part of the chapter I hope I have been able to demonstrate some striking similarities between Cavell and Brooks, points of congruence that moreover serve to shed light on the problematic I call aesthetic skepticism, and its specific subgenre with regard to poetry: poetic skepticism. Before concluding this first part of chapter 6, I would like to summarize these simi-

[635] Brooks, "The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth," pp. 164–165.

larities and spell out what they reveal about this particular form of the skeptical problematic, which is related to, but not identical with, interpretive skepticism as it has been discussed so far:

1. Brooks and Cavell have a similar view of the relation between modernist art and its tradition. Both think that modernist poetry on the one hand radically departs from its poetic tradition, but in order to be successful – even for it to be poetry at all – this radical poetry must still be a *continuation* of that tradition. It must constitute a transformation, not a break, with tradition. This means that successful modernist poetry reshapes the grammar of poetry, altering thereby the self-understanding of the tradition itself. What the tradition *is*, is thus up for grabs along with the status and meaning of the new works seeking recognition. This is a situation that both Brooks and Cavell believe makes the question of the *sincerity* of the poet pertinent in a special way.
2. However, sincerity may lack or fail to bear fruit among both modernist poets and critics; *fraudulent* poetry and criticism does exist. The critic or poet may be "naked," or be "walking in a barrel," according to Cavell and Brooks. Both consider fraudulent art and criticism to constitute a real risk in modernism: fraudulence exposes a truth in aesthetic and poetic skepticism.
3. But the only way to find out, to expose fraudulence and to "test" new art and poetry and criticism – is from the inside. Whether a poem is a poem, whether it makes sense and is aesthetically successful, are matters that cannot be settled by "experts," history, or "proof." This means, and again Brooks and Cavell agree, that the reader must *actively* execute his or her own aesthetic judgment and make up his or her own mind about the modernist works.
4. This situation, however, reveals something that is *always* true of the understanding of art and poetry – modernism only makes more acute a condition inherent in all art and art criticism: both require the activity of the reader. It is for this reason that fraudulence is always a risk in art and criticism.
5. The similarities already accounted for above draw out interesting affinities between the interpretive claims of *close reading*, the philosophical appeals to "what we say when," as well as Cavell's particular rendering of aesthetic judgment. All three are claims to community awaiting acknowledgement, none of them can be proved or validated by experts, and all require the individual's active exercise of his or her own judgment. The "we" invoked in all three cases expresses an *invitation* to the reader to try out if he or she can see what the critic or philosopher sees; it is not a claim about any empirical "we."
6. Furthermore Brooks and Cavell agree that there also exists a kind of "truth" in the claim that modernist poetry has a certain relation to priva-

cy. This reveals a second kind of truth in aesthetic and poetic skepticism: that the linguistic and aesthetic community modernist poetry offers will, out of necessity, divide people into insiders and outsiders (in a logical and aesthetic sense) – not all will be able to "get inside." This is a predicament that in turn is true (to a varying degree) of all art and poetry. Interpreters can indeed be helpful in helping readers "get inside" since their interpretations offer keys and ladders into the poetry. But whether or not the reader can make use of these ladders and keys is for each and every reader to try out.

7. Related to the previous point – or, rather, as a further depiction of it – is the relation between metaphors and skepticism which Cavell explores, and which also centers on the possibility of intimacy and alienation in poetic language. Here one finds a third truth in poetic skepticism. While metaphors try to push our interpretive community in language deeper and further than our common criteria otherwise permit, skepticism abandons that community through the repudiation of that criteria. Either way, both become "unnatural" but in opposite ways. Metaphors risk isolation in the hope of reaching intimacy whereas skepticism does not dare to risk anything and thereby condemns itself to solitude and nonsensicality. Metaphors are emblematic of poetry in that they show how one important stake in poetry (not least the metaphor-heavy poetry of modernism) is precisely aesthetic and linguistic *intimacy*. The form that the critic's acknowledgment of poetry's claim to both community and intimacy takes is that of interpretation.

What does all this reveals about *aesthetic* skepticism? Firstly that the phenomenon of *fraudulence* in art and poetry – which both Cavell and Brooks acknowledge as a *real* risk in art and art criticism – does not itself constitute aesthetic skepticism. Rather, I would say that the possibility of fraudulence exposes "a truth" of aesthetic skepticism, namely that occasionally *we do not know* whether something is art. It is also true that fraudulent art and criticism exist: we *can* be duped. The fraudulent critics, however, the avant-garde and the philistine, do become *aesthetic skeptics*, because they try to avoid and ignore (and thereby in practice repudiate) the conditions by which art is assessed as art, either by trying to turn these into matters of expertise knowledge – the avant-garde thinks that if the "right" crowd calls something art, then it is safe to jump on the train and do so too – or by treating the matter as though it could be empirically proven or falsified – as is the case with the philistine, who, in noting that new art departs from old criteria takes this as *proof* that the new art is not art. What fraudulent critics do is to skeptically deny the grammar and criteria of this *kind of problematic* – which requires that one sticks out one's own neck and risks judgment, to see for oneself whether something can or cannot be called art.

So while fraudulent poets and critics exist, the only way to approach suspicions of fraudulence (just as with suspicions of nonsensicality), and to expose them for what they are is by working *from the inside*. Here, there is an important similarity between the logic and authority of appeals to "what we say when" in Cavell's philosophy, and the logic and authority of *close reading*. The inconclusiveness of such philosophical and critical investigations – that not everybody will come to the same conclusions, or be able to get "inside" – does not render the practice of criticism (any more than philosophy) irrational. Rather it shows what particular kind of rationality is at work in both activities.

Furthermore, this possibility of fraudulence, inherent in both art and criticism, is something that becomes endemic in periods of modernism. Another way of formulating this second point would be to say that in modernism *all* cases are what I have called interpretive *hard* cases. In fact, if one takes seriously both Brooks and Cavell's analyses of modernism – namely, that modernism itself makes more pressing and visible the very conditions that belong to art as such – this can also shed light on a point I have already intimated regarding interpretation: that *all* interpretive cases are more or less *hard* cases. They are more or less hard cases in the same sense Brooks argues that while modernist poetry *radically* changes the criteria of poetry (and thereby the poetic tradition), more traditional and conventional forms of poetry change the tradition too, albeit to a *smaller* degree. Likewise, interpretive hard cases, as I have introduced the term, can engender radical reevaluations of the grammar of literature and interpretation, but *all* interpretive cases are (at least to a minute degree) "hard" in the sense of being non-obvious, in requiring some form of *work*, activity, and imaginativeness. In short: just by being interpretations. It is analytically true that all interpretive cases are somewhat "hard" in the sense that they are necessarily distinct from "best cases" of understanding meaning. "Best cases" are defined precisely by being understood immediately, without the need for any preceding interpretive effort.

Turning now from aesthetic skepticism to poetic skepticism more specifically, I said that for Brooks the problem concerned the question "What is poetry? Do we really know when something is poetry?" This question for him (not least because of Eastman's charge of the nonsensicality of modernist poetry) was intimately linked to the question of the *meaningfulness* of poetry: "How do we know if a poem is meaningful?" This means that *poetic skepticism*, as Brooks encounters it, is a fusion of *skepticism about poetic meaning* and *aesthetic skepticism whether something really is poetry*. Or perhaps I should rather put it this way: poetic skepticism – as it faces Brooks through Eastman's charges against modernist poetry – has the form of doubt-

ing the *realness* of the poetry by questioning the *meaningfulness* of that poetry.[636]

It is possible, however, to imagine an aesthetic skepticism about poetry, a poetic skepticism, which does not necessarily cohere around the question surrounding the meaningfulness of poetry. Nonetheless, I think that there is a sense in which *aesthetic skepticism* (whether it concern poetry, painting, music, or any other art form), necessitates questions of *meaning* – namely by inherently centering on questions of *criteria*. To ask the Cartesian skeptical question whether we *know* that something is really poetry or art, carries with it the Kantian skeptical problematic of whether we know what "art" and "poetry" *mean* – whether we know their criteria.[637] Or as R.M. Berry writes "For […] Cavell […], aesthetic modernism takes on more than merely aesthetic value. What enables its expanded relevance is art's traditional disclosure of the very thing modernity is sceptical about: meaning."[638] Here I think one can see that *aesthetic skepticism* resembles meaning or language skepticism, in the way that its Cartesian variety ("How do we know if something is art?") almost immediately collapses into the Kantian variety ("How do we know what the criteria, and the conditions of possibility of art are?"). So even if *poetic skepticism* does not necessarily doubt what individual *poems* mean, what it does necessarily cast doubt over is whether we know what "poetry" means.

[636] It can be interesting to note, just in passing but with regard to this issue, what Beardsley writes in *The Aesthetic Point of View* (1982), namely that "a senseless poem is a contradiction in terms. It may be possible to take issue with this, though I think not for long. The strings of more or less random words or nonsense syllables or even mere letters set down by Dada writers should not trouble us. I do not think we have to be counted as enemies of art if we refuse to call these productions poems." Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, eds. Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 167.

[637] I take this point to accord with what J.M. Bernstein writes in his excellent chapter on Cavell, modernism, and fraudulence in *Against Voluptuous Bodies*: "Aesthetics should not be regarded as essentially about the nature of art, about talk about artworks, or about an arty and empty way of seeing ordinary things (aesthetic perception); nor is it a logic of the beautiful, whatever the beautiful is. It has been understood in all these ways. […] This is why I began by expressing the *stakes* of aesthetics, modernism, and art/literature in transcendental terms, that is, in terms of the necessary conditions of cognition, meaning, reason." J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, p. 82.

[638] R.M. Berry, "Stanley Cavell's Modernism," in *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, p. 43.

6.2. Cleanth Brooks, Interpretive Skepticism, and "The Heresy of Paraphrase"

6.2.1. The Heresy of Paraphrase and *The Well Wrought Urn*

Throughout the first half of this chapter I have focused on the similarities that bring together the work of Brooks and Cavell, specifically how each thinker seeks to respond to suspicions of fraudulence in modernism. I claimed to find interesting affinities between the logic and authority of Cavell's philosophical appeal to "what we say when" in combination with his understanding of aesthetic judgment, on the one hand, and the logic and authority of close reading in Brooks, on the other. In this, the second half, it is now time to attend to the differences and contrasts at play between their respective thinking. Here attention will turn to the critique Cavell levels against, in particular, Brooks's arguments in the "Heresy of Paraphrase."

As Douglas Mao writes in "The New Critics and The Text-Object," "the archetypal New Critic for most today is Cleanth Brooks, author of the immensely influential *Well Wrought Urn*."[639] "The Heresy of Paraphrase" is probably Brooks's most well-known essay from that particular volume. Angela Leighton writes in "About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase," (2009) that "[a]lthough Brooks's new criticism has suffered its own waning since the 1940s, paraphrase, as a serious critical idea, has never really made a comeback."[640] "The Heresy of Paraphrase" is the eleventh chapter of *The Well Wrought Urn*, preceded by ten interpretations of individual poems in the ten previous chapters and followed by two theoretical appendices: "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism" and "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," and a third appendix containing eight of the ten interpreted works.

Besides presenting close readings of poems from Donne to Yeats, *The Well Wrought Urn* also contains arguments against various forms of reductionist treatments of poetry, arguments against readings which Brooks believes fail to appreciate poetry as *poetry*. One form is that of reductionist contextualization: when poetry is mainly treated as expressive of something else, of something outside or beyond it. Such reductionism can be found, Brooks argues, in both historical criticism and literary scholarship where a poem is seen primarily as a representative of its epoch, culture or genre, and when critics feel restricted to ask of the poetry "only what its own time

[639] Douglas Mao, "The New Critics And The Text-Object," p. 237.
[640] Angela Leighton, "About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXIII (2009), pp. 167–168. In fact, Leighton briefly touches upon Cavell's discussion of Brooks and paraphrases of poetry, though without discussing interpretive skepticism. See Leighton, "About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase," p. 171.

asked; that we must judge it only by the canons of its age."[641] But reductionist contextualization can also occur, Brooks adds, with regard to "the poetry of the present," such as when contemporary poetry is treated "merely as a political, or religious, or moral instrument."[642]

In "The Heresy of Paraphrase," however, Brooks focuses on the particular form of reductionism and distortion he thinks is created through a common and illicit splitting of poetry into "form" and "content." The heresy in question is perpetrated when the paraphrasable *content* of poetry, its "prose-meaning" or abstracted "statement," is taken to be its "core" or "essence," whereas its *form* is merely considered to be the beautiful package in which the poet has wrapped his or her ideas. A poem is not ultimately, Brooks argues, "prose-sense decorated by sensuous imagery."[643]

Before one starts to analyze the arguments of this essay in more detail, it is important, I think, to take into account how "The Heresy of Paraphrase" fits into the structure of *The Well Wrought Urn* as a whole. If one does not (and I will return to this point in 6.2.4.), it will be hard to justly assess its theoretical claims and commitments. In Brooks's own view "The Heresy of Paraphrase" should not be seen as a set of theoretical arguments stated in isolation, or possible to sever from preceding literary interpretations. In the preface to *The Well Wrought Urn* he writes:

> I have attempted to examine, in terms of a common approach, a number of celebrated English poems, taken in chronological order, from the Elizabethan period to the present. Whether or not the approach is really a common approach, and whether or not the examination reveals that the poems possess some common structural properties, are matters for the reader to determine. The last chapter ["The Heresy of Paraphrase"] attempts some generalizations upon these properties, and upon the characteristic structure of poetry. There is something to be said, I think, for thus exhibiting the concrete examples on which the generalizations are to be based. If this procedure is frankly part of a strategy for securing conviction, it also constitutes, I may point out, something of a check on the generalizations made in the final chapter – a means of testing them. I could hope that, if the worst came to the worst and the account of poetic structure itself had to be rejected, some of the examples might survive the rejection as independent readings of the poems concerned. At all events, the readings represent an honest attempt to work close to specific texts.[644]

"The Heresy of Paraphrase" is an attempt to characterize the structure and nature of poetry in general. But the validity of this account, Brooks underscores, is based on the individual readings: any generalizations advanced are rooted in, and are to be checked against, the validity of concrete interpreta-

[641] Cleanth Brooks, "Preface," *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. x.
[642] Brooks, "Preface," *The Well Wrought Urn*, pp. x–xi.
[643] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 204.
[644] Brooks, "Preface," *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. ix.

tions. This means that Brooks is not only giving the preceding interpretations priority in terms of *value* (such that if his account of poetry and poetic structure is to be rejected he hopes that at least some of the readings will gain approval); they also have methodological and logical priority with regard to the validity of his generalizing theoretical claims in "The Heresy of Paraphrase."[645] The structure of the book also has the following methodological implications for any analysis of "The Heresy of Paraphrase": it licenses the reader to move quite freely between what Brooks argues explicitly in that particular chapter and what he writes in the other parts of the book. This is a liberty I will be taking. I will even go so far as to propose that one *should* adopt such a strategy when analyzing the essay, since "The Heresy of Paraphrase" supposedly has its argumentative roots spread all over the book.

What is it that unifies the ten analyzed poems, Brooks asks in "The Heresy of Paraphrase"? If there is something common to them all, it cannot be found in any specific content or particular poetic subject – the poems are too diverse for that. Instead, Brooks argues, what the results of the readings imply is that the poems share something he calls poetic *structure*. The term "structure" should not be misunderstood as "form." By structure Brooks does not mean things like "metric pattern" or "the sequence of images" in a poem, but something more "internal" to the poem as a whole.[646] If anything, the term "structure" is introduced as a means to challenge the opposition between form and content and the "conventional sense in which we think of form as a kind of envelope which 'contains' the 'content'."[647] The term "structure" is supposed to capture the way in which there is no real possibility to make a *clean* cut between the "form" and the "content" of a poem, because these ultimately affect one another too deeply: "The structure obviously is everywhere conditioned by the nature of the material which goes into the poem. The nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material."[648] In contrast, the division between form and content creates, according to Brooks, "a false dilemma" for the critic: he or she is either "forced to judge the poem by its political or scientific or philosophical truth" or is "forced to judge the poem by its form as conceived externally and detached from human experience."[649]

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[645] This is something Brooks stresses in the beginning of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" too. He writes: "The reader will by this time have made up his mind as to whether the readings are adequate. […] If the reader feels that they are seriously inadequate, then the case has been judged; for the generalizations that follow will be thoroughly vitiated by the inept handling of the particular cases on which they depend." Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 193.
[646] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 194.
[647] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 194.
[648] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 194.
[649] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 196. In this context Brooks also pauses to address the critique leveled at the New Critics – especially when they are referred to as "new formalists" – when he writes that they seem to be "accepting the latter horn of the dilemma." This is something he takes to be a misunderstanding *and* a symptom of the very "dualism" of the

Elaborating on what constitutes the poetic structure, Brooks describes it as "a structure of meanings, evaluations, and interpretations," further adding that "the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings."[650] The poetic structure is furthermore "a pattern of resolved stresses […] and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme."[651] The terms he advocates for capturing these features of the structure, and which he frequently employs in the preceding readings of poems he provides, include: "ambiguity," "irony," "complex of attitudes" and "paradox."[652] The centrality of "paradoxes" for Brooks's analysis of poetry can be seen in the first chapter of *The Well Wrought Urn*. There he argues, through a reading of John Donne's "The Canonization," that poetry is constituted by a certain kind of language: "the language of paradox."

Before I discuss how the proposed "language of paradox" relates to the problem of the paraphrase, I think it is important to note that Brooks himself is not fully satisfied with the terms he uses. He writes: "Perhaps they are inadequate. Perhaps they are misleading. […] But adequate terms – whatever those terms may turn out to be – will certainly have to do justice to the special kind of structure which seems to emerge as the common structure of poems so diverse."[653] Nonetheless, Brooks thinks that "[t]he conventional terms are much worse than inadequate: they are positively misleading in their implication that the poem constitutes a 'statement' of some sort, the statement being true or false, and expressed more or less clearly or eloquently or beautifully."[654] It is thus as a response to such a misleading picture of poetry that Brooks presents the idea of poetry as speaking the "language of paradox" and as being structured by irony, ambiguity and tension. His theorizing is a response to what he considers to be the central source of the "distempers" of criticism – a problematic he labels "the heresy of paraphrase":

> [M]ost of our difficulties in criticism are rooted in the heresy of paraphrase. If we allow ourselves to be misled by it, we distort the relation of the poem to its "truth," we raise the problem of belief in a vicious and crippling form, we split the poem between its "form" and its "content" – we bring the statement

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form/content dichotomy that his account of poetic structure tries to overcome. Brooks is not accepting either horn of the dilemma since he does not take it to be a real dilemma to start with. Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 196.

[650] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 195.

[651] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 203.

[652] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 195.

[653] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 195.

[654] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 196. Similarly, he writes in the first appendix to *The Well Wrought Urn*: "The dualism of form and content thus put a stop to criticism by compelling us to locate the poetry in the truth of the statement made by the poem or contained in the poem (actually, a paraphrase of the poem, not the poem itself); or, to locate the poetry in the 'form' conceived as a kind of container, a sort of beautified envelope." Brooks, "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism," p. 226.

> to be conveyed into an unreal competition with science or philosophy or theology.[655]
>
> Indeed, one may sum up by saying that most of the distempers of criticism come about from yielding to the temptation to take certain remarks which we make *about* the poem – statements about what it says or about what truths it gives or about what formulations it illustrates – for the essential core of the poem itself.[656]

From these two quotes I think one can begin to see that there is a *range* of slightly different but interrelated issues embedded within the problematic called the heresy of paraphrase. On a more general level Brooks is concerned with a reductive split of the poem into form and content. This split fosters an overemphasis on the "content" of the poem that in turn actually obscures the "content," since the meaning of the poem *is* obscured when formal matters and the overall structure of the work are ignored. I think this observation and warning against reductive readings is both valid and important, especially with regard to philosophical attempts to lift up the "arguments" or "theses" of literary works. Brooks reminds us that poetry – but the point could be made about literature more generally – is not merely arguments or ideas dressed up in pretty language, and therefore should not be treated as such either. This is one of the central points Brooks is making when he writes: "[t]he poem [...] does not properly eventuate in a proposition: we can only *abstract* statements from the poem, and in the process of abstraction we necessarily distort the poem itself."[657]

However, this is not the *only* point Brooks is making. One can also discern more specific, and for the present-day reader perhaps more curious, worries at work in "The Heresy of Paraphrase." First of all, the splitting of the poem into "form" and "content" is said to force poetry into an undue "competition" with science and other academic disciplines with regard to "truth." A second further worry is that the content of the poem is reduced to a "statement," which is then taken to be the very "core" of the poem. These can appear as strange and puzzling threats. Regardless of whatever reductive effect the splitting of poems into form and content may have for interpretations of poetry, why would this split entail that the content in question be seen as a "statement" and that the statement be understood as the *core* of the poem? Hardly all reductionist readings are accompanied by this rather strange theoretical generalization about poetry as such. And why would the split force us to question how and whether poetry in general can reveal *truths*

[655] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 201.
[656] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 199.
[657] Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 252.

and whether these truths are *competing* with the truths of science? How, then, are these worries related to one another?[658]

I will deal with these questions in 6.2.3., but at this juncture I would like to turn to what can be taken as the logical kernel of the problematic called the heresy of paraphrase – that which lies at the bottom of both the critique of the form/content distinction and the critique of the idea that the paraphrasable content (the presumed "statements") is the essence of poetry – namely, the idea that *nothing* but the poem itself can say *exactly* what the poem says. In a central passage of "The Heresy of "Paraphrase" Brooks writes:

> [T]he reader may well ask: is it not possible to frame a proposition, a statement, which will adequately represent the total meaning of the poem; that is, is it not possible to elaborate a summarizing proposition which will "say," briefly and in the form of a proposition, what the poem "says" as a poem, a proposition which will say it exactly, no more and no less? Could not the poet, if he had chosen, have framed such a proposition? Cannot we as readers and critics frame such a proposition? The answer must be that the poet himself obviously did not – else he would not have had to write his poem. We as readers can attempt to frame such a proposition in our effort to understand the poem; it may well help toward an understanding. Certainly, the efforts to arrive at such propositions can do no harm *if we do not mistake them for the inner core of the poem* – if we do not mistake them for "what the poem *really* says."[659]

This is a very interesting paragraph, for many reasons. First one can note that it is not only the reader or the critic that is, in Brooks's view, unable to say *exactly* what the poem says in a paraphrase – the poet cannot do it either. We

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[658] Of course, one might not find these questions puzzling at all. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, there is an "ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry, registered already by Plato, and the problems that Brooks enumerates could just as well be taken to be modern versions of that conflict. Furthermore, it is a commonplace that New Critics inherited a sense of conflict between science and poetry from their Romantic ancestors. M.H. Abrams writes: "Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Mill, and many of the contemporaries, conceiving poetry as the language of feeling, thought the lyrical poem, instead of the epic tragedy, as the exemplary form, and replaced history as the logical opposite of poetry by what Wordsworth called 'matter of fact, or science.' This romantic innovation, positing poetry as an antithesis to 'science,' has become a common theoretical gambit in the twentieth century; and, as we shall see, both Continental Formalists and American New Critics tend to establish the essential nature of poetry by detailed opposition to the features attributed to the language of science." M.H. Abrams, *Doing Things With Texts*, p. 14. One might feel, then, that Brooks's posed conflict between poetry and science with regard to truth needs no further explanation, that one can merely recognize with Richard Foster that "the New Critic's doctrine that Poetry is Knowledge, is romantic in substance and mood," or with Murray Krieger that "the science-poetry dichotomy out of which this theory grows was originally a romantic one, and as such contained many elements of irrationalism, some few of which Brooks seems still to maintain." Richard Foster, *The New Romantics*, p. 137 and Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry*, p. 140. I think there is more to say about this, though, as I will attempt to show in this second part of the chapter.

[659] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," pp. 205–206.

as readers and critics may "attempt to frame such a proposition" in the process of trying to understand the poem, but we must not, Brooks underscores, mistake those propositions "*for the inner core of the poem*" or for "what the poem *really* says." What I find most striking about this passage, though, is the initial assumption Brooks makes, namely that the reader "may well ask" whether it is "not possible to frame a proposition, a statement, which will adequately represent the total meaning of the poem […] which will say it exactly, no more and no less?" It seems to me that the relevancy of the warning – that we must not do this – hangs on whether readers *are* in fact likely to do this. On this point I do not share what seems to be Brooks's intuition: that this is a question that would arise naturally in readers of poetry. Or rather, I would say that in order for such a question to arise, the reader would need to be struck with some sort of problem or puzzlement, and depending on what, more specifically, the puzzlement or problem *is*, the very meaning of the question posed will alter. By this I mean that depending on the puzzlement in question, what *counts* as "saying exactly the same as the poem" will vary, and so will the naturalness of the question posed too.

But in general I think that, if asked whether one believes that a proposition or statement can say *exactly* what the "poem 'says' as a poem," most readers will spontaneously reply: of course not! When X is a paraphrase of Y, X is supposedly saying the same thing as Y but in other words. In many cases of linguistic expression the exact phrasing is not essential for what is said: the same meaning can come through unchanged in another formulation. In poetry this is *obviously* not so. In poetry every part of the poem is significant. If something in the poem is altered, the poem is altered. So I presume that most readers – if they would take Brooks at face value, as saying something we all know and recognize – would typically not ponder and dwell upon this question but rather immediately acknowledge that Brooks is right: *only* the poem can say *exactly* what the poem says.

This of course requires that one understands Brooks in a certain way, as meaning something quite familiar. However – and this becomes the curious thing about the situation – to the extent that Brooks is understood as speaking about an *obvious* feature or fact with regard to poetry, I also think that few would feel that this is a fact in need of any argumentation. But Brooks is clearly *arguing*, and believes that he *has to* argue, that only the poem can say exactly what the poem says. The point is stressed over and over in *The Well Wrought Urn*, and also in the interpretations of the poems he provides. For example, in chapter four, devoted to Herrick's "Corinna's going a-Maying," Brooks writes:

> To sum up: our examination of the poem has not resulted in our locating an idea or set of ideas which the poet has communicated with certain appropriate decorations. [...] As we have made this exploration, it has become more and more clear that the poem is not only the linguistic vehicle which conveys the

> thing communicated most "poetically," but that it is also the sole linguistic vehicle which conveys the things communicated accurately. In fact, if we are to speak exactly, the poem itself is the *only* medium that communicates the particular "what" that is communicated.[660]

In a previous quote Brooks had said that neither the poet nor the critic can frame a "proposition" which says *exactly* what the poem says. Now he states that "the poem itself is the *only* medium that communicates the particular 'what' that is communicated." Allow me to pause at this juncture and dwell upon what is really being claimed here. I think there are predominantly two ways to read these quotes.

One is the way I suggested before, namely that Brooks is registering something obvious – something true but quite empty, like a tautology – which we would all agree upon: that in poems all parts bear the weight of significance and if something is changed, the totality of the poem is changed and therefore its overall meaning is altered. To know this, I think, is to know what a poem is, it is part of its grammar. But I also said that to the extent Brooks is making *that* point it is something about the very effort to *claim* it that sort of twists it: the very attempt to *convince* us of something obvious raises questions about the point itself, about what the point *is*. I also said that the logical kernel of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" was the idea that *nothing* but the poem itself can say *exactly* what the poem says. But to the extent this is something Brooks regards as requiring argumentation, it is not immediately clear what the idea, what *his* idea, is anymore.

So while Brooks can be read, on the one hand, as addressing the sense in which it is *obvious* that only the poem can say exactly what the poem says, I also think he is here trying to respond to a sense of wonder that indeed can arise in readers of poetry more or less naturally: an experience of being struck with a kind of (initial or lasting) *mute wonder* in response to a poem, a feeling of knowing *exactly* what the poem says; one is convinced that what it says is immensely important, and yet one feels unable to say *what* it is. Or at least *exactly* what it is: only the poem can say *that*. And this sense of wonder and muteness can be dealt with, understood, and redeemed in various ways. Depending on what you want to do, what you try to do, and what you end up succeeding in doing, then what you take this experience to mean or indicate will vary. One way of understanding the question Brooks assumes the reader "may well ask" – i.e. whether it is possible to formulate a paraphrase which says *exactly* what the poem says (though I have not yet distinguished what *exactly* is taken to mean here, and this is very much significant) – is as a response to an experience of really *wanting* to do this. The reasons why you want to do it can vary too. It can be in order to make clear for yourself that you really *do* understand the poem. Or it can be in order to communicate and

[660] Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" p. 74.

share your understanding with others by offering an interpretation. On such an occasion the reader/critic may on the one hand find it obviously true *in one sense* that only the poem can say exactly what the poem says, but, on the other hand, one may feel bewildered as to how one should relate *that* sense to the puzzling predicament of *wanting* to say *exactly* what the poem says, and being (so far) unable to do so in any satisfactory way. Part of the difficulty of such an experience could be that you are not yet entirely sure what would satisfy you: what would it *mean* here to "say exactly" what the poem says?

This predicament leads me to a second way of reading the above quotes, a way of reading them that registers how Brooks is doing something more than merely restating a tautology, trying instead to argue something more *substantial*. If one reads Brooks in this way then the stress on *only,* and the scare-quotes that are wrapped around "what" in the second quote take on a different meaning. One gets a sense that there is something rather *mystical* going on in the meaning-making of poetry: "the particular 'what' that is communicated" appears more enigmatic and evasive. This second way of reading these passages picks up on how Brooks tries to *relate* the tautological sense (of how only the poem can say exactly what the poem says) to an experience of something that we readers *cannot do*. This reading focuses on how Brooks sets out to *explain* both of these phenomena by means of a *theory of poetic meaning*. It is this attempt at a theoretical explanation, which, in my view, leads Brooks into theoretical, and ultimately skeptical, confusion.

That Brooks is trying to say something more substantial about what paraphrases cannot do, and *why* they cannot do it, is evident already in the first chapter of *The Well Wrought Urn*. In this chapter Brooks tries to explain the unparaphrasability of poetry through his theory of "the language of paradox." In the following passage one gets a clearer picture of how Brooks relates paradoxes and paraphrases to one another through his theoretical account of the *special kind of meaning* poetry has. While interpreting Donne's "The Canonization" Brooks writes:

> Donne might have said directly, "Love in a cottage is enough." "The Canonization" contains this admirable thesis, but it contains a great deal more. [...] I submit that the only way by which the poet could say what "The Canonization" says is by paradox. More direct methods may be tempting, but all of them enfeeble and distort what is to be said. This statement may seem the less surprising when we reflect on how many of the important things which the poet has to say have to be said by means of paradox: most of the language of lovers is such – "The Canonization" is a good example; so is most of the language of religion – "He who would save his life, must lose it"; "The last shall be first." Indeed, almost any insight important enough to warrant a great poem apparently has to be stated in such terms. Deprived of the character of paradox and its twin concomitants of irony and wonder, the matter of

> Donne's poem unravels into "facts," biological, sociological, and economic.[661]

According to Brooks, one can say, on the one hand, that the poem indeed *contains* the sentiment that "Love in a cottage is enough." In that sense the interpretive paraphrase "Love in a cottage is enough" is apt. However, the paraphrase clearly does not capture *all* of what the poem says: there is obviously more to the poem than this. So far this remark can still be taken as expressive of the tautological sense in which only the poem can say exactly what the poem says. But in the quote Brooks also argues that poetic meaning *as such* can only get expressed through what he calls the language of paradox. The language of paradox is a mode of discourse that Brooks defines by contrasting it to (his conception of) the language of science: "[i]t is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox."[662]

Here I think one sees an attempt at a more substantial claim about what poetry *can* say and what paraphrases *cannot* say. Such a claim is meant to explain both the tautological sense in which only poetry can say exactly what it says *and* why we can feel mute or at least inadequate in expressing our understanding of poetry with our own words. According to Brooks, not only is the poem itself the only vehicle for *its specific* meaning as an individual poem, but poetical language (the language of paradox) is furthermore the only *kind* of language that can capture and express certain insights, truths and meanings – predominantly those of a more *mystical* nature. Whereas, in scientific discourse, paradoxes are nonsensical obstacles to knowledge and communication, all the important insights of poetry, love and religion require "paradoxes" for their expression and communication.[663]

Evidently, what Brooks calls "paradoxical" language encompasses much more than, strictly speaking, *paradoxes*: it includes allegories, analogies, metaphors, irony, ambiguity, etc. In fact, the language of paradox appears to have room for almost any sort of linguistic device, so long as it is not a mere expression of (scientific) *facts*, or straight, unambiguous *literal* sense. Referring to I.A. Richards in this context, Brooks writes:

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[661] Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," pp. 17–18.
[662] Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," p. 3.
[663] Richard Foster writes the following on what he finds to be the mystical rhetoric of negation in New Criticism: "Both Tate and Brooks, like Shapiro, have the mystic's usual difficulty in finding intersubjective positives in which to describe their essential experience of or belief about the nature of poetry. The best they can produce is vague and inadequate abstraction, or else citations of what they regard as illuminating analogies – as Brooks cites architecture, ballet, and music – which last recourse, perhaps, like Tate's trope of the poem as its own knower, is a gesture of return toward the mystic's 'primary' language of his immediate experiences of essences." Foster, *The New Romantics*, p. 167.

> We may approach the problem in this way: the poet has to work by analogies. All of the subtler states of emotion, as I.A. Richards has pointed out, necessarily demand metaphor for their expression. The poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think, if we are sufficiently alive to what he is doing.[664]

The language of paradox is thus characterized by being *indirect* and figurative.[665] No paraphrase, or number of paraphrases, can get it all (there is always *more* to the poem) or get it exactly right (the paraphrases will never get *exactly the same* meaning with all its subtleties) because this *kind* of meaning "necessarily demand[s] metaphor for their expression."

If one reads "The Heresy of Paraphrase" in light of Brooks's theory of the language of paradox – and the claim that only the poem can say *exactly* "what" the poem says in the more *substantial sense* – one will find some serious problems for interpretation. For now it seems as if interpretation can *never* succeed or be completed, and this for two reasons. Not only is the unique poem the *sole* adequate vehicle for its unique meaning, but poetic meaning is of a kind that is *principally* untranslatable into prose. All interpretations must fail since the meaning they are trying to express is one that interpretive prose cannot, as it were, *touch*. "The Heresy of Paraphrase" can thus be taken to suggest that the very act of interpretation itself becomes an act of distortion. It fails to reach the goal of interpretation, which is presumably, at least to a greater extent, to express and communicate what the poem *says* – or in Brooks taxonomy – to *paraphrase* what the poem says.

A range of questions therefore arise as to how Brooks views the possibility of poetic interpretation: If an interpretation can never say *all* of, or *exactly*, what the poem says, does this imply that poetic interpretation ultimately becomes impossible? If Brooks is right, what does it *mean* to achieve interpretive satisfaction and completion? Moreover, how does the unparaphrasability of poetry reflect back upon the close readings of *The Well Wrought Urn*: how should one conceive of Brooks's own interpretations and their purported accuracy and validity? Are all interpretations necessarily heretical? With these questions in mind it is time to turn to Cavell's critique of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" and to how I think it helps to demonstrate that Brooks unwittingly becomes a new kind of interpretive skeptic.

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[664] Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," pp. 9–10.

[665] In the first chapter Brooks writes: "science makes use of the perfect sphere and its attack can be direct. The method of art can, I believe, never be direct – is always indirect. But that does not mean that the master of the game cannot place the bowl where he wants it. The serious difficulties will only occur when he confuses his game with that of science and mistakes the nature of his appropriate instrument." Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," p. 10.

6.2.2. A New Version of Interpretive Skepticism. Cavell's Critique of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" and Brooks as an Interpretive Skeptic Regarding Poetry

"The Spirit of the Age is not easy to place." These are the words with which Cavell begins "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy."[666] Rudrum has described this essay as "an alert sparring partner against various orthodoxies in the then dominant New Criticism, particularly Cleanth Brooks's concept 'The Heresy of Paraphrase.'"[667] I think this is a good characterization. In fact, I would even venture that this inaugural sentence is meant as a direct allusion to Brooks, who in the preface to *The Well Wrought Urn* writes: "The temper of our times is strongly relativistic."[668] The allusion, if it is there, reads almost like a correction: while Brooks hones in on an important contemporary problem of criticism, the problem is fraught with difficulties and Brooks fails to accurately capture and place it. Or as Cavell writes explicitly later in his essay: "Brooks is wrong to say that poems cannot in principle be fully paraphrased, but right to be worried about the relation between paraphrase and poem."[669]

In this section I will argue that Cavell's critique of Brooks helps to bring out a new version of interpretive skepticism, and which has thus far not been treated in the previous chapters of this book. So far interpretive skepticism has concerned, on the Cartesian level, doubts as to whether we can separate *valid* interpretations from *invalid* misinterpretations, and on the Kantian level whether we can rely on our understanding of *the criteria* of interpretation and interpretive validity. These were the skeptical problems with which Beardsley was battling in his (skeptical) epistemological theory of interpretation. These are not, however, Brooks's problems. The skeptical problematic in "The Heresy of Paraphrase," if there is one, concerns interpretive *completion* and, more specifically, it concerns the interpretation of poetry.[670] This version of interpretive skepticism raises the following doubt: if interpretations (paraphrases) can never *fully* capture the meaning of a poem, does that mean that *all* interpretations of poetry must fail? Since the interpretation will never be able to express the *exact* meaning of the poem, does that mean that, when it comes to poetry, interpretive success, and thus interpretation as such, is inherently impossible?

The way in which one chooses to answer these questions will depend on what one understands Brooks to *mean* when he says that *only* the poem can

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[666] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 73.
[667] Rudrum, *Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, p. 100.
[668] Brooks, "Preface," *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. x.
[669] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 82.
[670] The problematic of interpretive completion could, of course, be transposed onto the interpretation of prose as well, as long as the problematic of the language of paradox as a specific kind of poetic meaning is removed.

say *exactly* what the poem means. I said earlier that, to the extent Brooks is here only stating something obvious, there is no need – and I could add: no possibility – to *argue* for it. But Brooks *does* argue for it and this raises questions about the very sense of his claims. Two (interrelated) questions therefore present themselves: *what* more specifically is it that Brooks thinks that the paraphrase *cannot do*? And *why* does Brooks feel that he has to argue for it? It is by addressing the first of these two questions that Cavell's critique helps me analyze and distinguish a new version of interpretive skepticism. However, Cavell does not ponder on the second question, and this somewhat limits, I argue, his treatment of the first question. The consequences of this neglect will be dealt with in 6.2.3.

The first thing that should be made clear, though, is that in Brooks's own view, the unparaphrasability of poetry does *not* entail that poetic interpretation is impossible or useless. According to Brooks "[t]he point is surely not that we cannot describe adequately enough for many purposes what the poem in general is 'about' and what the general effect of the poem is."[671] Paraphrases are not, he thinks, *inherently* misleading or distortive, and for the purpose of criticism we can indeed use "paraphrases and pointers and shorthand references provided that we know what we are doing."[672]

But even if Brooks does not consider interpretations of poetry to be inherently heretical, if no paraphrase can capture the exact meaning of the poem, the question of what constitutes interpretive completion and exactness still remains. Brooks is not unaware of this problem, and he touches upon it in one of his appendices when he asks: "[h]ow accurate, how exact, can the paraphrase be and with what approximation to accuracy will the critic be satisfied?"[673] Nevertheless, not being completely unaware of the problem does not mean that Brooks is overly troubled by it either. For him it suffices to think of the interpretive act as, in principle, an infinite process of getting ever closer toward the the meaning of the poem, without ever being able to *fully* grasp it. This is a characterization he gives of his own readings as well, and in a footnote to the "The Heresy of Paraphrase" he writes:

> We may, it is true, be able to adumbrate what the poem says if we allow ourselves enough words, and if we make enough reservations and qualifications, thus attempting to come nearer to the meaning of the poem by successive approximations and refinements, gradually encompassing the meaning and pointing to the area in which it lies rather than realizing it. The earlier chapters of this book, if they are successful, are obviously illustrations of this process. But such adumbrations will lack, not only the tension – the dramatic force – of the poem; they will be at best crude approximations of the poem. Moreover – and this is the crucial point – they will be compelled to resort to

[671] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 196.
[672] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," pp. 196–197.
[673] Brooks, "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism," p. 242.

> the methods of the poem – analogy, metaphor, symbol, etc. – in order to secure even this near an approximation.[674]

One can again see two interrelated problems that poetic interpretation faces. The first is that of *completion* and *exactness*: the paraphrase may approximate the meaning of the poem but it can never fully coincide with it. The second problem is the *kind of meaning* at stake in interpreting poetry: as Brooks argued in "The Language of Paradox" he thinks that certain insights and truths require certain forms of expression in order to be captured. "[T]he crucial point" with regard to the latter problematic is, according to Brooks, that the paraphrase will need to become more *like* the poem, it will have to use the "methods of the poem" in order to achieve "even this mere approximation." These two problems fit together in the following way: paraphrases can first of all *never* completely and exactly capture and express the meaning of the poem because only the unique and singular poem can do that. However, paraphrases can get closer to that particular meaning of the poem by mimicking it in *kind*, that is, by adopting (to some extent) the language of paradox.

Now, Cavell does not register the problem associated with the *kind of meaning*. Nonetheless, I think that one should see it as actually playing a part in Brooks's confusion and is spurious in itself. An immediate irony that one ought to index is that the very idea that poetry harbors a certain type of meaning, that prose *qua* prose cannot grasp, seems to reinstate the very form and content-divide which Brooks had sought to surmount: paraphrases become inadequate to capture the meaning of poems in part because prose as a linguistic tool is unfit to be the "envelope" for the kind of meaning that poetry contains. However, it is mainly the problem of completion and exactness I intend to focus on, since this is the precise problem Cavell works with.

As Cavell correctly notes, when Brooks describes his own readings as mere approximations he is not "confessing his personal ineptitude; he means that any paraphrase, the best, will only be an approximation."[675] But if *all* interpretations are approximations, even the best ones, what happens with the contrast between approximation and success itself? How is the contrast construed and how is the goal and success of interpretation actually conceptualized? At this juncture Cavell makes an important and revealing comparison between the requirements for completeness and exactness in "The Heresy of Paraphrase" and the requirements for completeness and exactness of knowledge in traditional skeptical problems in philosophy:

> This is the sort of thing that happens with astonishing frequency in philosophy. We impose a demand for absoluteness (typically of some simple physical kind) upon a concept, and then, finding that our ordinary use of this con-

[674] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 206.
[675] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 76.

> cept does not meet our demand, we accommodate this discrepancy as nearly as possible. Take these familiar patterns: we do not really see material objects, but only see them indirectly; we cannot be certain of any empirical proposition, but only practically certain; we cannot really know what another person is feeling, but only infer it. […] This much, however, is true: If you put such phrases as "giving the meaning," "giving a paraphrase," "saying exactly what something means (or what somebody said)," and so on, into the ordinary contexts (the "language games") in which they are used, you will not find that you are worried that you have not really *done* these things. We could say: *That* is what doing them really is. Only that serenity will last just so long as someone does not start philosophizing about it.[676]

Here Cavell is not explicitly calling Brooks an interpretive skeptic. However, Cavell clearly claims that Brooks is doing the same "sort of thing" as the external-world skeptic and the other-minds skeptic: they are all "imposing a demand for absoluteness […] upon a concept" that is not attuned with our ordinary ways of using the concept, and when the discrepancies cause problems, Brooks as well as the traditional skeptics try to "accommodate this discrepancy as nearly as possible" without giving up the philosophical demand for absoluteness. Consequently, the external-world skeptic denies that we *really* see empirical objects and that we *really* can assert empirical propositions (we can only *practically* or pragmatically rely upon them); the other-minds skeptic denies that we can *really* know what other people think or feel (we can only infer it from the outside behavior); and finally this kind of interpretive skeptic denies that we can ever say *exactly* what the poem says (we can only approximate its meaning).

What all these instances of skeptical requirements for absoluteness share is thus the feature of *denying* what we know in the "ordinary contexts" or "language games" where these concepts and our dealings with them reside. In all the above cases the skeptical demand for *absoluteness* simultaneously denies our ordinary contrasts between failure and success, between knowing and not knowing, between getting it exactly right and merely almost right. By describing the goal of the interpretation as one in which the interpretive paraphrase on the one hand strives to *approximate* the meaning of the poem, but on the other hand never can *fully* reach it, Brooks "denies," Cavell writes, "the ordinary contrast between 'approximate' and 'exact'."[677]

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[676] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 77.

[677] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 76. In fact, I think Michael Fischer unfortunately risks making a similar move in his attempt to criticize the interpretive skepticism in deconstructionist criticism. Fischer writes: "Although we cannot be absolutely sure about the meaning of a text, we can be sure enough to go on as critics, teachers, and readers. From this point of view, deconstructionists inexplicably expect too much. Their commitment to certainty is admirable but out of place in literary criticism and everyday life, where we have to be – more strongly, where we can be – content with probabilities, inferences, educated guesses, and some degree of indeterminacy." Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p. 33.

But why is this necessarily a problem? So what, Brooks is not using the contrast as it is usually used – to the extent it is used at all (and for many interpreters of literature I assume the contrast itself feels somewhat foreign) – why could he not do that? To this question Cavell retorts: "Well, if I am right, he *did* do it. Although it is not clear that he *wanted* to."[678] As I see it, the problem with Brooks denying the ordinary ways to use the contrast between exactness and approximation in interpretation, is that Brooks mixes two different and separately possible ways of describing the relation between poem and paraphrase. He confuses two *incompatible* ways of asserting what the paraphrase can and cannot do in terms of reaching "the exact" meaning of the poem. What these two different ways are will now require elucidation.

The first way of construing the contrast is the one Cavell describes as belonging to the context of real interpretive work. As Cavell points out, it is not the case that interpreters are generally worried about *in principle* being unable to do their work. If, and when, we are indeed worried about not getting an interpretation *exactly* right, this anxiety is normally not rooted in any general theoretical fear that *all* interpretations must fail to explicate the meaning of poems, but in some specific concern that this or that interpretation might fail to do so. As I hinted earlier though, I think there are quite a few cases in ordinary interpretive work, where we actually talk about our interpretive achievements in terms of getting it "exactly" right or merely "approximating" exactness. But to the extent that we do (and it does happen), and to the extent that there is a goal of exactness to attain for interpretation, both approximation and getting it exactly right is *in principle* within reach of the interpreter. Or to formulate the same point in another way: to the extent that it *makes sense* to speak of an interpretation approximating the meaning of the poem, it *necessarily* also makes sense to speak of an interpretation as getting it exactly right.

However, there is also another way in which the paraphrase and poem can be related to each other, namely the one I called the tautological sense in which a paraphrase *obviously* never can get the exact meaning of the poem. And the logic of this relation is, as it were, the opposite to the first: to the extent that there is a sense in which the paraphrase *can never* capture and restate the complete and exact meaning of the poem – to the extent *it makes sense* to say this – it does *not* make sense to say that the paraphrase can still *approximate* this meaning.

This is what constitutes the problem then: these two different ways of describing what the paraphrase can and cannot do with regard to the meaning of the poem, these two distinct logics, are *mixed* in a confused manner in "The Heresy of Paraphrase." The following passage in Cavell clarifies, I think, what happens when these two logics get confused:

[678] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 76.

> It may help to say: In speaking of the paraphrase as approximating the poem (the meaning of the poem?) he [Brooks] himself furthers the suggestion that paraphrase and poem operate, as it were, on the same level, are the same kind of thing. […] And then he has to do everything at his philosophical disposal to keep paraphrase and poem from coinciding; in particular, speak of cores and essences and structures of the poem that are not reached by the paraphrase. It is as if someone got it into his head that really pointing to an object would require actually touching it, and then, realizing that this would make life very inconvenient, reconciled himself to common sense by saying: Of course we *can* point to objects, but we must realize what we are doing, and that most of the time this is only approximately pointing to them.[679]

The crucial irony and skeptical twist of Brooks's idea of the paraphrase as approximating the meaning of the poem is the following: Brooks, on the one hand, wants to capture the way in which a paraphrase can *principally* never say what the poem says. *This* sense of "can never get it *exactly* right" elicits the grammatical relation of the paraphrase as being logically and aesthetically *secondary* to the poem. It focuses on how an interpretive paraphrase is produced in order to *serve* a poem and that its inherent *purpose* is to enhance the understanding of the poem. When we say, in this obvious sense, that only the poem can say exactly what the poem means, we are appreciating the fact that with regard to understanding poetry, paraphrase and poem can never switch places: you do not read the poem in order to understand and appreciate its paraphrase (or if you do you are changing the game, you are not then primarily interpreting the poem anymore). Paraphrases are not produced in order to make the poem *obsolete* or take its place: you cannot read the paraphrase *instead* of the poem in order to read the poem. Or as Brooks writes in the second appendix to *The Well Wrought Urn*: "The discussion of the poem is not to be substituted for the poem: it should return us to the poem."[680] In short: in order to read the poem you have to *actually read the poem*. The paraphrase will not give you the poem itself, because it *is* not the poem itself. But this is a tautology! And though it is necessarily true, it does not give us any sort of *substance* as to what the paraphrase *cannot* do. All it says is the obvious: that the paraphrase cannot *be* the poem.

However, when Brooks tries to capture *this* particular logical relation between poem and paraphrase by describing it in terms of *approximation* he is unwittingly advancing the very opposite point he is trying to make, namely, as Cavell writes, "that paraphrase and poem operates, as it were, on the same level, are the same kind of thing." In fact, he is not only suggesting that the paraphrase is the same *kind* of thing, although he does that too by underlining what he thinks "is the crucial point": that the paraphrase will have to mimic the "methods of the poem" and become more like the poem to approach exactness. He is even unwittingly construing the goal of the interpre-

[679] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," pp. 76–77.
[680] Brooks, "The problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 261.

tive paraphrase, its criterion of success and completion, as that of *becoming* the poem itself. Remember that he wrote: "such adumbrations will lack, not only the tension – the dramatic force – of the poem; they will be at best crude approximations of the poem."[681] The criterion of getting the meaning *exactly* right for the interpretive paraphrase is thus nothing less than *being* the poem itself.

Here is where I think one can see most clearly how Brooks is in line with traditional skeptics: he imagines that in order to *really* and *exactly* express the meaning of the poem, the interpretive paraphrase would actually have to *be* the poem. This is quite analogous to the way the other-minds skeptic imagines that in order to *really* and *exactly* understand your pain, I would have to *have* it. And not just in the ordinary sense in which I *can* have "the same" pain as you, say that we both have a migraine – that would still be me having *my* migraine and you *yours*. Instead the other-minds skeptic construes the criteria of exactness in a logically impossible way so that in order for me to have the *exact* same pain as you I would have to have the one in *your* head, and feel how it feels *for you*, as *you* are having it, i.e. to really know *that* pain I would have to *be* you.

But of course neither paraphrases nor human beings can do that, the paraphrase cannot be the poem and I cannot be you. But the manner in which they cannot do these "things" is merely in a tautological sense, in an *empty* sense. There is no conceivable *thing*, no *substantial* intelligible something which would count as *doing* these things either. It is here that I think one can also see what is defective in Brooks's attempt to *argue* for what was ultimately a tautology. His predicament resembles the one in chapter 2, when I recounted Moore's effort to prove the existence of the external world by attempting to *claim* that *here* there really are two hands. Once more one can ask: to *whom* are Moore and Brooks *telling* these things? *What* are they actually succeeding in saying? I think that Brooks's attempt to claim anything specific at all misfires, just like Moore's attempt to claim that here there is a hand, because both are trying to make (what Cavell called) a claim in a non-claim context.[682]

I think it is now safe to conclude that in "The Heresy of paraphrase" one can once more see a case of Cartesian skepticism, which both harbors and hides its own Kantian boggle. On the Cartesian level or stage of Brooks's skeptical reasoning it looks as if there is a certain *something* that we as interpreters cannot do *practically*, namely to say *exactly* what the poem says. And as long as we are on the Cartesian stage this "thing" we cannot do is nevertheless treated as a *theoretically* conceivable *something*. The *illusion* of there being a specific something (which we cannot do) will only be exposed if we follow our Cartesian skepticism to its logical endpoint. If we clarify

[681] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 206.
[682] See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 217–221.

what it would *mean* for a paraphrase to *approximate* the exact meaning of the poem – and expose how "exact" is here construed as *being* the poem – we will see then that we did not really mean *that* because there was no clear *that* to begin with. Instead, Brooks wavers between two different ways of discussing the *exact* meaning of the poem in relation to the paraphrase. As far as it made sense to talk of the paraphrase as approximating the meaning of the poem it also made sense to talk about exactness, but as far as it did not make sense to talk of exactness, it did not really make sense to talk of approximation either. Brooks therefore ends up not really meaning what he says, not really knowing what he means, i.e. in an illusion of sense. As a result, "The Heresy of Paraphrase" ends up displaying interpretive skepticism regarding poetry. And the reason it does so is *that Brooks wants to express something like a grammatical remark about the logic of interpretation as if it were an arguable hypothesis*. It is, to speak with Wittgenstein, "a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that."[683]

The question that should force itself upon the reader now, though, is: *why?* Why does Brooks feel that he has to do that? What prompts him to try to *argue* for a tautology? *Who* could he possibly be trying to convince? If the effort was to give something like grammatical remarks about the logical relation between poem and its interpretive paraphrase, then who needs these remarks and in relation to what problem or puzzlement are they given? These are questions that Cavell does not ask, and the fact that he does not raise such questions makes his critique of Brooks, in my view, a little shortsighted. Asking these questions will perhaps not save Brooks from unwittingly becoming an interpretive skeptic about poetry, but it will reveal how *reluctantly* he became one. Hopefully it will also shift the reader's view of Brooks as a skeptic about poetic interpretation to Brooks as a clear-sighted critic who tried to give grammatical remarks in response to a real philosophical assault on the meaningfulness of poetry.

As I see it, and as I will argue in the next section, Brooks did not become an interpretive skeptic because he had a strong (but confused) idea of what interpretations *cannot* do, but through some unfortunate turns in his defense of what poetry *can* do. With regard to his attempt to defend poetry, I will also claim that Brooks presents a valid critique, not only of reductive readings of poetry, but of readings that become reductive because they are *guided* by faulty and dogmatic theories of meaning. Brooks may have become a skeptic of poetic interpretation but he became one by fighting certain philosophical requirements of meaningfulness that are imposed on poetry. I will argue that as a critic of such theories, Brooks's critique can be rehabilitated as potent grammatical remarks made in response to a skeptical theory of language that threatened to turn poetry into nonsense. In the next section I

[683] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §37, p. 7e.

will therefore explore how "The Heresy of Paraphrase" contains a valid critique of a skeptical picture of poetic meaning.

6.2.3. The Heresy of Paraphrase as Critique of Reductionism and Skeptical Misconceptions of Poetic Meaning.

In 6.2.1. I mentioned two worries that Brooks expresses in "The Heresy of Paraphrase" and that could be said to puzzle a present-day reader. These were that the form/content-divide, according to Brooks, a) places poetry in undue competition with science with regard to truth, and b) tempts the reader to conceive the paraphrasable content of the poem as the core, essence, or real meaning of the poem. In order to understand why Brooks becomes an interpretive skeptic I think one must investigate these worries a bit further and see why they appeared so threatening. In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" Cavell briefly touches upon the latter of the two concerns when he writes:

> We may have some trouble in seeing plainly that the paraphrase is *not* the real core, or essence, or essential structure or inner or real structure of a poem; the same trouble we should have in understanding what *is* any or all of these things, since it takes so much philosophy just to state them. It is hard to imagine someone has just flatly given it out that the essence, core, structure, and the rest, of a poem is its paraphrase. Probably somebody has been saying that poetry uses ornaments of style, or require special poetic words; or has been saying what a poem means, or what it ought to mean – doing something that makes someone else, in a fit of philosophy, say that this is distorting a poem's essence.[684]

Cavell's response to Brooks's worry about the "core" of poetry seems to be the following: it is hard both to understand and to contest Brooks's idea that the paraphrase is *not* the real meaning of the poem since it is hard to imagine how anyone would ever *begin* by arguing for the position Brooks is arguing *against*. Instead, Cavell proposes, when someone probably has said something quite ordinary about how poems can use "ornaments of style" or "poetic words," Brooks has most likely taken this *in the wrong way*, in a "fit of philosophy." It is this "fit of philosophy" which causes the confusion, not the preceding talk about ornaments and style. Rather, for Cavell the entire business "has the gait of a false issue."[685]

That this business *has* in part the gait of a false issue – the result of a confusion – is not something I wish to contest. However, I do not think that it is critical commonplaces or theoretically innocent remarks that have caused Brooks to respond in a "fit of philosophy," as Cavell suggests. That Brooks

[684] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 75.
[685] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 75.

does answer in a "fit of philosophy" is to my mind a correct observation. As I demonstrated in the previous section, I even think that Cavell's critique helps to show that this is a *skeptical* fit of philosophy. But rather than Brooks mysteriously starting to answer casual comments about poems and interpretations with skeptical fits of philosophy, I think Brooks should be seen as being *dragged* into philosophy by sensing that *philosophy*, or a certain *philosophical picture* of meaning, poses a skeptical threat to the meaningfulness of poetry. It is in an attempt to *save* the meaningfulness of poetry from the reductionist and skeptical demands of philosophy that Brooks instead sacrifices interpretation on the skeptical altar.

As I said in the previous section, Cavell interrogates Brooks on the matter of *what* Brooks actually means by what he says, but not *why* he tries to mean what he says. I think one reason he does not is that Cavell seems to read Brooks as primarily targeting Yvor Winters in "The Heresy of Paraphrase." It is certainly true that Brooks cites Winters as "perhaps the most respectable example of the paraphrastic heresy" and that he devotes some energy and textual space to challenge Winters in both "The Heresy of paraphrase" and in the second appendix: "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism."[686] However, I do not think one should overstate Winters's role as a central target of Brooks's critique.[687] I think one should instead take Brooks's word for

[686] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 200. See also Brooks, "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism," pp. 239–240 and "The Heresy of Paraphrase," pp. 200–203, where Brooks criticizes Winters's argument that the verbs "wore" and "passed" contain the same "rational meaning." See Yvor Winters, *The Anatomy of Nonsense*, in *In Defense of Reason*, pp. 365–366. To this Brooks retorts: "But the word *wore* does not mean *literally* 'that the night passed,' it means literally 'that the night wore'– whatever *wore* may mean, and as Winters' own admirable analysis indicates, *wore* 'means,' whether *rationally* or *irrationally*, a great deal." Brooks, "The Heresy of paraphrase," p. 201. Cavell, to a rather small extent enters their dispute and partly sides with Winters. He writes: "We owe it to Winters to make it clear that he does not say any of the philosophical things Brooks attributes to him. His thesis, having expressed his total acquiescence in the fact that paraphrases are not poems, is that *some* poems cannot be paraphrased […] [and] that poems which are unparaphrasable are, in that specific way, defective." Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 77. Later Cavell goes on to add that "we owe it to Brooks to acknowledge a feature in Winters' position which may be causing his antipathy to it," namely Winters's claim that all unparaphrasable poems are failures. In the end Cavell finds both critics wanting: Brooks in his conclusion about paraphrases, Winters in his too far-reaching generalizations about what constitutes poetic success. See Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 82.

[687] With regard to Cavell's claim that Winters is not saying "any of the philosophical things Brooks attributes to him," there is room for qualifications. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 82. On the one hand, Winters makes it clear in "The Experimental School in American Poetry," as he does elsewhere in *In Defense of Reason*, that he does *not* think that poems are *reducible* to their paraphrases but that he considers paraphrasability as a necessary requirement for poems: "[A] paraphrase, of course, is not the equivalent of a poem: a poem is more than its paraphrasable content. But, as we shall eventually see, many poems cannot be paraphrased and are therefore defective." Yvor Winters, "The Experimental School in American Poetry. An Analytical Survey of Its Structural Methods, Exclusive of Meter," *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry,* in *In Defense of Reason*, p. 31. But we owe it to Brooks too, to admit that is not the end of the story. In *The*

it when he says that he acknowledges Winters as one of the more respectable heretics of poetry. This of course implies that there are other, far less respectable, heretics as well, and who these heretics are will become clear, I think, if one takes a closer look at someone who Brooks is praising in *The Well Wrought Urn*. Thus in the preface to *The Well Wrought Urn* Brooks writes:

> We live in an age in which miracles of all kinds are suspect, including the kind of miracle of which the poet speaks. The positivists have tended to explain the miracle away in a general process of reduction which hardly stops short or reducing the "poem" to the ink itself. But the "miracle of communication," as a student of language terms it in a recent book, remains. We had better not ignore it, or try to "reduce" it to a level that distorts it. We had better begin with it, by making the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem.[688]

Brooks never tells us who this "student of language" is, but if one views this passage in the light of the rest of the book, I think it is pretty clear that the author referred to is Wilbur Marshall Urban and that the "recent book" mentioned is his *Language and Reality* (1939).[689] In the "Heresy of Paraphrase," Brooks cites Urban's *Language and Reality* on more than one occasion, and he returns to discuss Urban even more extensively in the second appendix, where he writes that Urban's "position is so close to that which I have argued in earlier pages that it is worth devoting some space to his solution of the problem involved."[690]

Indeed, Brooks has reason to acknowledge his debt to Urban. One could actually go as far to say that *all* central thoughts of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" can be found already in Urban's work. It is in Urban where one finds the idea that poetry necessarily communicates *indirectly*.[691] Just like Brooks, Urban claims that in poetry and art "form and content, or content and medium, are inseparable. The artist does not first intuit his object and then find

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Anatomy of Nonsense, Winters explicitly states the following: "If rational communication about poetry is to take place, it is necessary to first determine what we mean by a poem. A poem is first of all a statement in words." Yvor Winters, *The Anatomy of Nonsense*, in *In Defense of Reason,* p. 363. So even though he does not consider the poem to be *reducible* to the statement, I think it is fair to say that he considers it to be, at least part of, its *core*.

[688] Brooks, "Preface," *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. xi.

[689] If the reference is to Urban, Brooks gets the quote slightly wrong: Urban writes of "the miracle of language," not of communication. See Wilbur Marshall Urban, *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism*, Library of Philosophy, eds. J.H. Muirhead and J. E. Turner (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd / New York: The MacMillan Company, 1939), pp. 234–235.

[690] Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 260.

[691] "All this poetry – and in their own way and to their own degree, the arts in general – say implicitly. It is only upon these assumptions that the poetic type of communication is at all possible." Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 498.

the appropriate medium."[692] Furthermore, Urban stresses the centrality of metaphors to poetry, and argues that poetic meaning is of a special kind, one which cannot be adequately rendered in prose: "All poetic symbols are, then, metaphors and arise out of metaphor. But a symbol is more than a metaphor. *The metaphor becomes a symbol when by means of it we embody an ideal content not otherwise expressible*."[693] Finally, in a passage strikingly similar to Brooks's, Urban asks more or less the very question Brooks assumed that the reader of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" "may well ask," and goes onto present a view almost identical to Brooks's theory of "the language of paradox":

> Is there anything expressed symbolically which may not better be expressed literally? With this question we are brought to what has been called the "paradox of literature." And it is a paradox in the toils of which all the greater creative minds find themselves more or less caught. Poetry says what it means but it does not say *all* that it means; in attempting to say this "all" it often ceases to be poetry. […] For precisely in that symbolic form an aspect of reality is given which cannot be adequately expressed otherwise. It is not true that whatever is expressed symbolically can be better expressed literally. For there *is* no literal expression, but only another kind of symbol. It is not true that we should seek the blunt truth, for the so-called blunt truth has a way of becoming an untruth.[694]

Urban claims, as Brooks does, that there is a special kind of meaning and truth that requires poetic (or symbolic) expression. What he calls "the paradox of literature" seems to be nothing but the mirror-image of a problem addressed in "The Heresy of Paraphrase": literature says what it means, but *all* of what it means cannot be *said* literally, directly. On the contrary, in order to communicate *all* of what it means, poetry has to speak indirectly and any attempt to transpose "all" of its meanings into direct, literal, discourse, must fail. Certain meanings and their truths, which describe certain "aspect[s] of reality," have "no literal expression." If one tries to paraphrase them into prose, one ends up with "untruth," according to Urban.[695]

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[692] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 462. Brooks also quotes this passage in "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 199.

[693] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 470. Also: "The metaphor is a symbol when it *alone* expresses or embodies our ideal meaning." Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 471.

[694] Urban, *Language and Reality*, pp. 499– 500. Brooks, quotes partly the same passage in "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," pp. 261–262.

[695] Whereas Brooks speaks of "paraphrases" in this context, Urban speaks of "translations." Comparing the language of a play of Shakespeare and a lyric by Swineburne, Urban writes: "in the case of literature, as distinguished from science, there are some forms, such for instance as a play of Shakespeare, which are translatable with scarcely any loss of meaning, while there are others, as for instance a lyric of Swineburne, which are as good as untranslatable." Urban, *Language and Reality*, pp. 236–237.

The centrality of Urban's thought for Brooks's arguments in "The Heresy of Paraphrase" is, I think, beyond doubt.[696] It is precisely for this reason that it is interesting to see in what ways Urban's proto-version of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" figure in his own overall work. "The problem of language," Urban writes, is "the problem of its evaluation or the problem of *linguistic validity*."[697] The problem of "linguistic validity" gets articulated in the following question: "How shall we use language so as to express the meaningful rather than the unmeaning, the true rather than the false?"[698] It is perhaps not too surprising that Urban also relates the problem of linguistic validity to that of skepticism, and claims that "[s]cepticism is always ultimately scepticism of the word."[699] While Urban proposes positive accounts of his own about linguistic validity he also devotes large parts of *Language and Reality* to criticisms of competing perspectives. One philosophical orientation he repeatedly opposes is logical positivism. In addressing the logical positivist's account of linguistic validity, Urban writes the following:

> The philosophical aspect of semantics may be seen specifically in the 'empirical criterion of meaning' as formulated by logical positivism. The object of this criterion is to find a means of distinguishing the meaningful from the unmeaning in language, apparent words from real words, pseudo-sentences from real sentences. This criterion is found in the references to observable entities, and, it is held, where such reference cannot be shown, language is meaningless.[700]

> The chief point, however, at which the linguistic issue appears is in the position of logical positivism, more especially with regard to metaphysics. As is well known, this form of positivism, like its progenitors, is characterized primarily by the wholesale elimination of large regions of so-called knowledge from the realm of actual knowledge and the reinterpretation of such knowledge as remains, namely scientific, in a fashion not wholly acceptable to scientists themselves. The fields eliminated are those of morals, religion, art, and above all, metaphysics. These are relegated to the sphere of feeling and emotional expression. The view of science maintained is that it is

[696] In "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," Brooks writes: "Urban is able to combat those theories which conceive of poetry as 'communicating' a 'content' external to the poem, and which thus split the poem between its 'form' and its 'content.' […] A poem, then, for Urban, is strictly untranslatable: what it 'says' can be rendered only by the poem itself […]. To substitute 'literal for symbol sentences' is to commit oneself to the heresy of paraphrase discussed earlier in this book. The expansion of the symbol had better be, not for the purpose of providing a nonsymbolic surrogate for the poem, but rather, as Urban puts it, for the purpose of 'deepening and enriching the meaning of the symbol.'" Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," pp. 260–261.
[697] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 37.
[698] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 208. "Linguistic validity is concerned with the problem of the evaluation of language as a *bearer of meaning, as a medium of communication and as a sign or symbol of reality*." Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 41.
[699] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 23.
[700] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 39.

> merely descriptive and that all "metaphysical propositions" are meaningless here also.[701]

Urban attacks the logical positivists on several points. Not only is he critical of how the logical positivists's "empirical criterion of meaning" is modeled on problems and ideals from the natural sciences and how it yet builds upon an idea of "knowledge" that is not even "wholly acceptable to scientists themselves," but he also thinks that "a position which makes such assumptions and turns a large part of man's discourse into the meaningless is one which, *prima facie* at least, lacks all intelligibility."[702] Furthermore Urban charges the logical positivist's criterion of meaning with being inconsistent and self-refuting. He writes that "as a matter of fact it can be easily shown that the empirical criterion, as formulated by the positivists, is itself met[a]empirical (or metaphysical) and on their own assumption should be meaningless nonsense."[703]

What is of most interest here, though, is that Urban criticizes logical positivists like Carnap and Ayer in the same breath as he criticizes I.A. Richards and Ogden.[704] This critique becomes all the more pertinent in accounting for the skeptical problems of Brooks's "The Heresy of Paraphrase," when, in chapter 10 of his book, Urban turns to the topic of "interpretation of poetry and poetic symbolism," and to "the determination of what poetry 'says.'"[705] What Urban writes about this problem, and its relation to one of the most influential forefathers of New Criticism, namely I.A. Richards, is in my view highly significant for a fair understanding of Brooks's dealings with the skeptical problems of poetic interpretation. Urban writes:

> Unfortunately there stands in the way of this task [to investigate interpretation of poetry] a widespread view which holds that poetry (and the aesthetic in general) says nothing. It merely evokes feeling and communicates emotion. This general position has been well expressed in the well-known works of Ogden and Richards. […] Either poetry contains assertions which are real propositions or it is nonsense. The issue may be stated in the form of a dilemma. Either these apparent assertions of poetry are real assertions or they are not, that is, mere expressions of feeling. If they are the former, then part of their understanding is their acceptance as true or false, and the notion of truth is applicable to poetry. If on the other hand they are the latter, they "say nothing" – they are the expression of a nonsense, however pleasant that nonsense may be.[706]

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[701] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 35.
[702] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 164.
[703] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 220.
[704] As he criticizes the theory of "purely emotive character of value words" Urban writes: "The thesis of value nominalism has been stated in two forms, that of Ogden and Richards and that of Carnap" according to which "[a]ll discourse about value is, in the strict sense of meaning, meaningless." Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 161, p. 160.
[705] Urban, *Language and Reality*, p. 476.
[706] Urban, *Language and Reality*, pp. 477–478.

Let me now compare this quote with the following passage from "The Heresy of Paraphrase," where Brooks explains why he thinks he needs a theory of poetic meaning in order to battle the "heretical" idea that the core of the poem is its paraphrasable statement:

> But what would be a positive theory? [...] For, to deny the possibility of pinning down what the poem "says" to some "statement" will seem to assert that the poem really says nothing. [...] Considerations of strategy then, if nothing more, dictate some positive account of what a poem is and does. And some positive account can be given, though I cannot promise to do more than suggest what a poem is, nor will my terms turn out to be anything more than metaphors.[707]

What I think one can clearly see here is that Brooks is not happily going about disturbing the "serenity" of interpretive practice with "fit[s] of philosophy," as Cavell suggests.[708] Brooks feels that he *has to* present a theory of what poetic meaning is because "to deny the possibility of pinning down what the poem 'say' to some 'statement' will seem to assert that the poem really says nothing." It will seem that way as long as one stays within the theoretical account of meaning of the logical positivists and I.A. Richards, according to whom the proper carrier of meaning – that which creates linguistic validity (to speak with Urban) – was the well-formed proposition, the assertion or statement that could possess a truth value.

This explains why Brooks is so concerned with the category of *statements* and why the core meaning of the poem should not be mistaken for a statement. If one does not see who and what Brooks is arguing *against* the "statement" appears a strangely limited linguistic category to focus on with regard to how a paraphrasic heresy can be committed. Via his appreciation of Urban I think it is evident that Brooks is challenging a philosophical requirement of meaningfulness according to which (much) poetry *would* be rendered nonsensical if it could not be paraphrased into a statement. What makes Urban such a helpful figure for Brooks is that "though he insists – in opposition to the nominalistic positivists – that poetry is revelatory, Urban refuses to set the poet the task of revealing some extra-poetic truth: poetry is not merely the vehicle of some content which it is to 'express.'"[709]

This means that Brooks opposes a *real* threat of poetic skepticism in "The Heresy of Paraphrase": there *is* a theoretical position of which it would not be unfair to say that it treats the paraphrasable statement as the *core* or true meaning of the poem, which gives priority to the paraphrasable content of the poem, and which does *not* treat poetry as poetry but as *poor* philosophy. So here Brooks finds himself embroiled in the ancient quarrel between phi-

[707] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," pp. 202–203.
[708] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 77, p. 75.
[709] Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 262.

losophy and poetry: Via Urban, Brooks struggles to oppose "those theories which claim cognition for poetry only at the price of considering it ultimately as distorted and imperfect philosophy."[710]

It is in response to this kind of theoretical conviction, which *guides* reductive readings of poetry, that it is possible, I think, to rehabilitate some of Brooks's claims about what the paraphrase *cannot do*, as grammatical reminders.[711] As such, these reminders do not misfire but help Brooks to carry out some important clarificatory work. In fact, if treated as grammatical remarks, exhortations such as "[t]he discussion of the poem is not to be substituted for the poem: it should return us to the poem"[712] and that "we can only *abstract* statements from the poem, and in the process of abstraction we necessarily distort the poem itself,"[713] have validity way beyond the specific critique of the meaning theory of Richards and the logical positivists. Such remarks can moreover function as potent reminders in response to *many* theoretically guided reductive interpretations – and not only to those interpretations in the field of poetry but also in response to theory-laden statements about literature, more generally.

Yet, two things ultimately compromise Brooks's critique as a critique of poetic skepticism. First, even though it is clear that his critique is directed significantly towards the theoretical heritage of I.A. Richards, it is equally clear that Brooks is incapable of completely severing himself from this very legacy. In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* Brooks writes that "[t]he counsel of I.A. Richards is to break science and the emotions cleanly apart – to recognise the separate validity and relevance of 'statements' (scientific propositions) on the one hand and of 'pseudo-statements' (unscientific but

[710] Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 261. Ultimately this is something he is afraid Urban is guilty of as well, since "For Urban [too], poetry, along with religion and science, is 'covert metaphysics.'" Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 261. What separates Urban and Richards, Brooks suggests, is on the question whether they conceive of the "covert metaphysics" of poetry as having any substantial cognitive sense or as being constituted by emotive pseudo-statements. The book ends with a barely successful attempt to reconcile Richards and Urban and to "point out the area of substantial agreement between two close students of language." Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 266.

[711] An irony is that this in fact brings Brooks and Cavell even closer together. As Sandra Laugier notes in "Rethinking the Ordinary: Austin after Cavell," Cavell also opposes the emotivism of Richards. She writes: "When Cavell […] claimed a rational dimension for statements like those of aesthetic judgment, he went against a dominant theory of his time, emotivism (now called non-cognitivism) – a theory that continues to play a decisive role in contemporary discussions. This theory came out of the idea that only cognitive statements, which represented states of things, were really statements, furnished with sense […]. Contrary to the interpretation of the *Tractatus* popularized by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*, and, in a different way, by the Vienna Circle, nothing could be more untrue to Wittgenstein than the idea that we cannot talk about aesthetics, or that aesthetics is in the domain of the merely 'emotive'." Sandra Laugier, "Rethinking the Ordinary: Austin after Cavell," *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p. 95.

[712] Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 261.

[713] Brooks, "The Problem of Belief and the Problem of Cognition," p. 252.

emotionally valid statements) on the other."[714] This in part becomes what Brooks settles with too in *The Well Wrought Urn*. On the one hand Brooks rejects the emotive theory of poetic meaning. In "The Heresy of Paraphrase" he makes it clear that his "general point, of course, is not that either poetry or drama makes no use of ideas, or that either is 'merely emotional' – whatever *that* is."[715] But on the other hand, he seems to accept the theoretical heritage of Richards to a sufficient degree in order to let *science* be ruled by these theoretical requirements of meaningfulness. This furthermore explains why Brooks does not want poetry to end up in a competition with science with regard to truth: scientific truth must follow the strict requirements of meaningfulness in the logical positivist idiom. Therefore the truth and meaningfulness of poetry must be of a different sort.

The second thing compromising Brooks's critical effort could perhaps also be formulated as his inability to distance himself sufficiently from the problem he criticizes. Brooks imagines that in order to effectively criticize any theory that threatens to turn poetry either into statements or into nonsense, he has to present an *alternative* theory of poetry and poetic meaning so as to *secure* poetic meaningfulness. It may be "[c]onsiderations of strategy," and nothing else, that prompts Brooks to present a "positive" theory, but the fact that he *does* is what turns him into a skeptical twin about poetic meaning. Here is why: Just as in the case of interpretive skepticism – where the interpretive skeptic can either be a straightforward skeptic or a skeptical twin – the crucial matter here is not whether the theorist is denying or defending poetic meaningfulness with his or her theory. It is the very idea that we would *need* such a theory in the first place to secure the meaningfulness of poetry that makes the theory skeptical. Brooks can therefore not escape the skeptical problematic of poetic meaning by presenting a positive theory of poetic meaning. The skeptical problematic of poetic meaning is just the flipside of the skeptical problem about poetic interpretation.

Another way to make this point is to recall how Brooks, in chapter 4 of *The Well Wrought Urn*, explicitly said that the very question of what poetry communicates is "badly asked."[716] Had he stayed true to that insight, and merely left it at that, his critique would have been uncompromised. However, after acknowledging that the question is badly posed, Brooks still tries to *answer* it through his theory of the language of paradox. This means that he *accepts* the skeptical way of formulating the problem and becomes a skeptical twin about poetic meaning.

In the first part of this chapter I tried to show that Brooks remained on the rough ground of interpretation when, with the advent of modernist poetry,

[714] Cleanth Brooks, "Yeats: The Poet as Myth-Maker," *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, pp. 173–174.
[715] Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," p. 204.
[716] Brooks, "What Does Poetry Communicate?" p. 67.

the meaningfulness of poetry appeared uncertain. In response to that threat of poetic skepticism, evoked by suspicions of critical and poetic fraudulence, Brooks responded by presenting close readings that invited skeptical readers to explore the meaningfulness of poems through the help of interpretation. The difficulties begin when Brooks encounters the threat of poetic skepticism (once more stated in the form of a charge of nonsensicality) from the area of *philosophy*; this is especially the case when the philosophy at stake is itself anchored within the tradition of New Criticism. When this occurs Brooks abandons, although unwillingly, the rough ground of interpretation in a "fit of philosophy."

6.2.4. The Eternal Pregnancy or The Eternal Approximation: To Be Able to Deliver an Interpretation is Not to Deny the Poem More Babies

I said in 6.2.3. that a plausible reason why Cavell does not see "The Heresy of Paraphrase" as containing a justified critique of a flawed philosophical conception of meaning could be that he sees Brooks as predominantly criticizing Yvor Winters. Cavell also seems to read "The Heresy of Paraphrase" more or less in isolation from the rest of *The Well Wrought Urn*. This in turn could explain why Cavell fails to appreciate the clearly secondary role that Brooks accords to his own theoretical generalizations in relation to the concrete, preceding, close readings he presents. Perhaps, if Cavell had picked up on the references to Urban that are scattered around *The Well Wrought Urn*, he might not have considered Yvor Winters to be Brooks's main adversary. This might have shifted Cavell's view on Brooks's theoretical commitment.

A further possible reason why Cavell fails to see the legitimate critique of theory in "The Heresy of Paraphrase" could be, if I am allowed to speculate, the manner in which he understands Winters's requirement of paraphrasability. If Cavell focuses on Winters as Brooks's main adversary in "The Heresy of paraphrase," and reads Winters's requirement of paraphrasablity as aligning with his own ideas about how fraudulence in art and criticism is exposed, it is not at all strange that Cavell would side with Winters and against Brooks in this particular conflict. This of course is one way the requirement of paraphrasability could be used: as a test of each critic's understanding of a poem. In this way, paraphrasablity merely becomes another way of formulating the point about the critic's burden and responsibility with regard to the sense-making of the poem. Cavell might read the requirement of paraphrasability in poetry, not as a dogmatic theoretical requirement grounded in neopositivist conceptions of meaning, but as an acknowledgement of the fact that in order to demonstrate and validate your interpretive claims, you should be able to articulate what you understand the poem to say *in your own words*.

I am not sure that this is an accurate understanding either of Winters's position or of Cavell's reading, but as an interpretation of Cavell I think it is strengthened by the following passage in "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy." Just after commenting on the Brooks and Winters-conflict, Cavell exemplifies how he sees the relation between metaphor and paraphrase by once more returning to Shakespearean tragedy. He writes:

> Now suppose I am asked what someone means who says, "Juliet is the sun." […] I may say something like: Romeo means that Juliet is the warmth of his world; that his day begins with her; that only in her nourishment can he grow. And that his declaration suggests that the moon, which other lovers use as emblems of their love, is merely her reflected light, and dead in comparison; and so on. In a word, I paraphrase it. Moreover, if I could not provide an explanation of this form, then that is a very good reason, a perfect reason, for supposing that I do not know what it means.[717]

This way of relating paraphrases to poems indeed expresses what I took to be a significant part of the affinity between the logic, authority and responsibility of close reading and the logic, authority and responsibility of Cavell's philosophical appeal to "what we say when," as discussed extensively in the first part of this chapter. A critic (as well as a student of literature) *should* be able to say what a work means in his or her own words, if he or she claims to understand it. If the critic cannot do this then that, according to Cavell, serves as "a very good reason, a perfect reason, for supposing that" he or she does "not know what it means." Such a reader has not presented "the pudding" in which the special kind of interpretive "proof" (which significantly cannot be a *proof* at all) is to be found.

However, what is even more important for the issue I want to focus on here, is how Cavell then goes on to stress the importance of the inbuilt *inexhaustibility* of paraphrasability in interpretation. The above quoted passage continues thus: "The 'and so on' which ends my example of paraphrase is significant. It registers what William Empson calls the 'pregnancy' of metaphors, the burgeoning of meaning in them."[718] There is a certain way in which paraphrases of metaphors cannot (*cannot* to be taken here in a logical sense) be exhaustive: there will be no pre-given endpoint as to how the metaphor is to be explicated. What Cavell is addressing here, I think, is one of the problems that Brooks tried to deal with in his discussion of the infinite *approximation* in interpretation – namely: how should we reconcile the relation between the fact that an interpretation can never say *all* that can be said about a poem, with the possibility and actuality of *interpretive completion*? Or: how can an interpretation ever be finished and complete when there is *always* more to say about the poem?

[717] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," pp. 78–79.
[718] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 79.

It may here seem as if Brooks and Cavell are saying more or less the same thing about poems and paraphrases with their respective metaphors. It also appears that they might be saying something *skeptical* too: if metaphors and poems are eternally *pregnant* with meanings, is that not the same as saying that interpretations will forever merely *approximate* those meanings but never fully reach them? No. While I think Brooks is trying to articulate precisely the point that Cavell (and Empson) make about poetic pregnancy, he fails due to his retention of the unfortunate term "approximation." These metaphors are not innocent and they work differently, they operate with different logics. While the picture of the *approximating interpretation/paraphrase* suggests a constant failure of completion for the poetic interpretation – the paraphrase gets closer and closer to the poem but can never *fully* reach its goal – the picture of the *pregnant poem* presents an alternative understanding of what interpretive completion *is* and what the criterion of completeness of an interpretation is. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell comments upon what he considers to be a misunderstanding of interpretive completion: that it would be constituted by a single and once-and-for-all exhaustion of the poem's meanings. His alternative way of understanding interpretive completion is the following: "Completeness is not a matter of providing *all* interpretations but a matter of seeing one of them *through*."[719]

This point can be worked out together with the metaphor of the pregnant poetry in the following way: the fact that I make an interpretation of a poem – and thereby bring out one complex structure of meanings through my reading – does not in any way prevent the poem from being, or becoming, pregnant with many other interpretations as well.[720] Poetry is promiscuous, generous, and fertile and can have infinitely many babies. I deliver one interpretation, someone else another. Interpreters are all (to varying degrees) humble suitors and midwives in the service of poetry.

The skeptical conclusion about interpretive completion and exactness – i.e. that interpretations of poems can never get it *all* or *exactly* right (in a purported substantial sense) – builds upon a misconstruction of the criterion of exactness and completion in interpretation. It hangs on, as I argued in 6.2.2., posing the poem itself as the interpretive goal. This expresses a misunderstanding of the grammar of "completeness" in poetic interpretation, what "completeness" in interpretation amounts to. It is a mistake comparable to construing the "completeness," of a child, not as the actuality of a specif-

[719] Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 37. This in turn opens up the problem of what following an interpretation through *is* – and what going *too far* and *not far enough* are. It opens the problem of overinterpretation and underreading and how to bring a reading to an end (these matters have already been discussed in chapter 5).

[720] Whether one would like to see this as me *making* the poem pregnant with my interpretation, or me as merely securing a safe – or not so safe – *delivery* of my interpretation is not important here. The degree of my intimate interfering with the meaningfulness of poetry in the interpretive process is not the issue, and one should not press the logic of the metaphor of pregnancy too far here, either.

ic, individual being, but as the actuality of all the possible siblings this child could possibly have – including itself. This is an actuality that no child could itself possibly exemplify or instantiate since there is no such thing: *that* is nothing but an incoherent fantasy. This point holds, I think, not only for interpretive completeness of poetry, but for interpretive completeness of literature in general. The irony here is, of course, that I believe that this is exactly the point Brooks was trying to make when he wrote that no paraphrase could express "the *total meaning* of the poem," and it is exactly the point I think he misconstrued when he described poetic interpretation as the, in principle, infinite process of approximating the meaning(s) of the poem.

6.3. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have tried to trace out some important similarities and differences between Cavell and Brooks in order to understand and hopefully dissolve certain problems that I think have to do with *aesthetic* and *poetic skepticism*. I have also sought to show how the problem of poetic skepticism relates to the kind of interpretive skepticism that Brooks exemplifies. This chapter has not only been one very long chapter on Brooks; it is, as it were two chapters moulded into one or, if you will, it constitutes a twin-chapter, consisting of two possible interpretations of Brooks and his relation to poetic skepticism. It is a chapter that testifies to my unwillingness to give dominance to one of two possible ways to comparatively interpret Brooks and Cavell, by either championing an interpretation that highlights their internal similarities – through which Brooks is seen as offering a potent therapy against poetic skepticism via close reading – or by championing an interpretation that highlights the differences and the conflicts, through which Brooks ends up an interpretive skeptic bound to ideas of interpretive completion and exactness. There are thus two "babies" – a skeptical and a non-skeptical interpretation of Brooks's relation to poetic skepticism – that I have wanted to deliver through this comparative reading.

In the first half of the chapter I pointed out what I think are striking similarities between Cavell and Brooks in how they respond to the possibilities and suspicions of *fraudulence* in modernist art, poetry, and criticism. Not only do they understand the relation between modernist poetry and the tradition in a similar way, but they also agree that the possibility of fraudulence, which modernism highlights, is in fact an immanent possibility in both modernist and traditional poetry and criticism. The possibility and actuality of fraudulence furthermore brings out other similarities in how they conceive of the conditions, logic, and authority of poetic interpretation. A central common view is that both deny that history, experts, or "proof" can simply tell us whether something is indeed art or poetry; whether a poem is meaningful or not; or whether an interpretation is valid or not. Both agree that the only

way to test the realness and meaningfulness of poetry is by *actively* trying to understand it from the inside. On this point I have argued that a principal similarity brings together, on the one hand, the authority and logic of Cavell's philosophical appeal to "what we say when," and his understanding of aesthetic judgments and, on the other hand, the authority and logic of close reading. Both require acknowledgment for validation and both are exposed to the risk of rejection.

This in turn relates to a few "truths" of poetic skepticism that both Brooks and Cavell agree upon: that fraudulence is a real risk in poetry (we can be duped), that poetry, especially modernist poetry, has the capacity to split audiences into insiders and outsiders, and that poetry and metaphors offer both deep intimacy as well as isolation and alienation. Skepticism and metaphors both transgress our community in criteria, though the skeptic does so through repudiation while poetry does it through intensification. Skeptical critics, those Cavell terms "avant-garde" and "philistines," try to avoid the riskiness of poetry: the risk of alienation and of not being able to "get inside," and the risk that comes with putting your own judgment at stake in assessing poetry. In other words, they try to avoid the challenge that modernist poetry issues to its audience: Can you see this *as* poetry? Can you make sense of this poetry? Max Eastman, who Brooks is criticizing on this point, tries to avoid the responsibility of poetic interpretation by demanding some sort of proof for the meaningfulness of modernist poetry.

Eastman's avoidance of these questions reveals the form poetic skepticism takes as it approaches Brooks. For Brooks the Cartesian question "How do you know that this is really poetry?" is posed *as* the question "How do you know that this 'poetry' is truly meaningful?" Though I have argued that the question of the realness of poetry need not take the shape of doubting the meaningfulness of poetry, I have claimed that the Cartesian variety of aesthetic and poetic skepticism quickly turns into a Kantian problematic since it centers on the conditions of possibility and the criteria of poetry and art.

In the second part of this chapter I looked at the threat of poetic skepticism, as Brooks faces it from the area of philosophy or theory, and I traced out the tensions, conflicts, and differences between Cavell and Brooks. I started investigating these differences by looking at Cavell's critique of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" which I claimed, in effect, constitutes a critique of a new form of interpretive skepticism: namely, a skepticism regarding interpretive *exactness* and *completion*. I continued by showing in what ways Brooks gets entangled in this skepticism by mixing two incompatible ways of contrasting the logical relation between poem and its paraphrase. I also argued that Cavell, through his critique of Brooks's description of the paraphrase as infinitely approximating the poem, could help to expose this skepticism: to the extent that it *makes sense* to say that a paraphrase can approximate the meaning of a poem it also makes sense to say that it can get it exactly right. However, to the extent it *does not make sense* to say that a para-

phrase can say exactly what the poem says then it makes little sense to say that it can still approximate that meaning. Brooks's discussion of the approximating paraphrase contains, I argued, a Kantian skeptical problematic disguised as a Cartesian problematic. Through his misfiring attempt to express a grammatical remark, Brooks unwittingly construes a logical impossibility as an empirical impossibility, thereby suggesting the very opposite of what he wants to say: that there is a specific and conceivable *something* that the paraphrase *cannot do*, namely *be* the poem.

Nevertheless, I also argued that Cavell, even while being correct in his criticism, falls short in his critique by failing to ask *why*, or to *whom* Brooks is trying to offer his (failed) grammatical reminders. I endeavored to show that Brooks's salient reminders were in response to an existing skeptical position, in the form of a meaning theory, which puts poetry in the dilemma of either being composed of true statements or pretty nonsense. And I argued that had Brooks been content with delivering his negative critique – that the very raising of the question of what and how poetry in general communicates, was a mistake – then his critique would have been successful and uncompromised. He would then not only have been able to successfully counter poetic skepticism in criticism (through the art of close reading) but also would have been able to stay clear of it when it addressed him from theory (by criticizing the question itself). However, while knowing that the question itself is badly asked, Brooks still tries to answer it with his alternative theory of "the language of paradox." In so doing though he ends up an epistemologist, a skeptical twin, about poetic meaning.

Finally, in the last section of the second part of this chapter, I have tried to show how Cavell in a manner both similar to, and yet different from Brooks, delivers the grammatical remark Brooks was looking for. It is Cavell's particular way of broaching the issue that dissolves, I think, the skeptical mystification about interpretive completion by substituting the metaphor of the pregnant poetry for the approximating paraphrase.

Chapter 7: Returning to the Rough Ground of Interpretation

> The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. – We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground![721]

> How can serious people habitually make such *vulnerable* claims? (Meaning, perhaps, claims so *obviously* false?)[722]

> You are different, what you recognize as problems are different, your world is different. ("The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man" (*Tractatus*; 6.43).) And this is the sense, the only sense, in which what a work of art means cannot be *said*. Believing it is seeing it.[723]

> Now any human act is, of course, a moral act; and any act of judgment, including that of aesthetic judgment, has a moral aspect. […] The classic difficulty involved in lumping aesthetic judgments in with moral judgments is, of course, that one thus ties aesthetic values to a moral system: poetry tends to become the handmaid of religion or philosophy, whether Christian, Marxist, or some other.[724]

> [T]he risk of aesthetic isolation [compares] with that of moral or political isolation.[725]

"Returning to the rough ground of interpretation" – this serves as the title for the final chapter of this book. The rough ground of interpretation is also the place to which I hope this investigation will have led us, and where it will come to an end, *its* end. But what does "the rough ground of interpretation" mean, exactly? One way of spelling out its meaning (a way that I do not

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[721] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §107, p. 40e.
[722] Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 83.
[723] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 86.
[724] Brooks, "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism," p. 239.
[725] Stanley Cavell, "Something Out of the Ordinary," *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, p. 9. Also quoted in Rudrum, *The Claim of Literature*, p. 31.

think is entirely wrong) is to place stress on the word "rough." The common ground of interpretation can indeed be rough; sometimes it is even described as a battlefield. Critical schools are said to fight one another (as the fate of New Criticism well illustrates); you defend yourself and your interpretive claims against possible assaults made upon the validity of your claims. The very sense that there be a common – which is to say, a *shared* – ground can feel dubious as the battle wages. In stressing the polemical aspects of interpretive discussions and arguments one can easily forget that there are other sides too, for example in the form of interpretive collaboration, that is, the help you get in understanding through interpretations that both align themselves with and go against your own – the fact, generally speaking, that you can continue, collectively, to widen or deepen the understanding of a work with others. But, as I have tried to show, the problems of interpretive skepticism tend to appear when either interpretations clash or when they seem to us as dubious or, thirdly, when we encounter a particular hard case. In any of these situations, as I have already discussed, we are sometimes tempted to *flee* from the rough ground of interpretation and make our escape to theory.

Is the "return to the rough ground" then an injunction to be good soldiers who stay and *fight* on the interpretive battleground? Is it to condemn deserters? Well, not quite. Although there is, contained within the metaphor of the battleground, something about a sense of bravery with which I would not wish to lose touch. Indeed, we should be courageous enough to investigate what is at stake when escapes to theory present themselves as most appealing, even if, I contend, that we should nonetheless resist the theoretical colonization of interpretive practices. Here, we need to make visible what happens when the effort to hold one's interpretive ground hurts – even wounds – us. Most of all, though, I think we have to acknowledge not only that interpretive clashes can wound, with theory working thereby as an anesthesia numbing the pain rather than explaining or curing the woundedness, but that theory can, occasionally, provide us with remedies. Or it might be the best we have when we try to survive as unacknowledged, incomprehensible, interpretive subjects.

In chapter 1 I recounted some theoretical problems in contemporary theories of interpretation, which I claimed were often fused with interpretive skepticism. In chapter 3, by proposing a general form for the structure of interpretive skepticism – and in chapters 4 to 6, by showing how this skepticism can be found in New Criticism generally and Beardsley and Brooks, in particular – I sought to spell out in greater detail what such fusions look like. So far then, the skeptical problematic I have dealt with has concerned interpretive theory in a more *strict* sense: I have looked at skepticism within interpretive theories that focus on the criteria of literary interpretation and the meaning of literature (or poetry) *specifically*. But interpretive theory and the theories we use in academic literary criticism are of course not limited to this kind. Frequently, literary interpreters appeal to sociological, political, femi-

nist, Freudian, historical, Marxist, etc. theories. Such theoretical positions neither strictly focus on the interpretive validity of literature nor on meaning and language per se. Such theories are nevertheless crucial for the argumentative outlook, aim, and structure – and thus validity – of the interpretations that appeal to them.

In light of the ways interpreters have made "escapes to theory" in the previous chapters, what a "return to the rough ground" means is that we should acknowledge that our own interpretive claims are claims to community in the sense that they (must) seek intelligibility, they thus appeal to "sharedness"; that we as interpreters shoulder the burden of making the sense we find in a text accessible to others; that it is up to *us* to show that *this* can mean *that*, and that a certain way of "seeing *as*" is *possible;* that interpretive hard cases, possible overinterpretations, interpretive conflicts, the apparent nonsensicality of certain poems, etc. are difficulties which should be dealt with *piecemeal*, on the rough ground of reading and sense-making – and not through theoretical attempts to state *in advance* the limits and criteria of interpretive validity.

Up to this point the problems I have dealt with have also been concerned with – and been possible to square with – a CM-mode (that is the "could mean-mode") of interpretation. By this, I mean the task of showing what a text (logically, sensibly) can mean. So when I discussed, for example, how Cavell's comparison with aspect-seeing can help us understand interpretive conflicts in chapter 5, I focused on the question of how two interpretations can at one and the same time be valid and yet be incompatible as a *logical* problem regarding interpretive validity. What was left untouched in that discussion, however, was *why* we would still argue in such cases – sometimes even vehemently – for one (possible) interpretation over another? If we can make sense of both interpretations, and at least on a cognitive level effortlessly switch between them, but still find one (clearly) preferable, then this suggests that the conflict does not merely concern what we *can* (logically, meaningfully) interpret the text to mean. Our willingness to fight for a certain interpretation stems from a sense of how we *should* interpret. This furthermore implies that the interpretive stakes on such occasions are not so easily combined with the CM-mode. Similarly, in chapter 6, I had discussed the possibility that an interpretive hard case can engender feelings of alienation and isolation. There, an idea of Eastman's was taken up, namely that *not belonging to the same world* as the modernist poets was a problem of *comprehension*. This problem was, for Eastman, an inability to make sense of a certain kind of poetry. But what I did not raise for discussion at the time is how interpretive alienation and exclusion often have sources other than mere logical or cognitive difficulties or aesthetic preferences. This in turn hints at further possible reasons why escaping to theory can become tempting as well as proposing additional dimensions regarding what a "return to the rough ground" can be – even what the rough ground itself can be.

My point, in short, is that in Beardsley and Brooks their escapes to theory were motivated by concerns *specifically* related to literature and interpretation. Beardsley wanted to understand – and thereby *save* – interpretation from skeptical relativism and subjectivism. Brooks wanted to understand – and thereby *save* – modernist poetry from suspicious charges of being covert nonsense, and poetry (in general) from being treated as "statements" draped in flowery language. But readers of literature may want to understand – and thereby *save* – other things too, things which literature speaks about/to/from/against/of. Literature *matters* to us, and in our efforts to articulate how and why it matters, and should matter, interpreters often reach for what I call "big theories" while interpreting. With "big theories" I mean the kind of (predominantly *structurally* oriented) theories to which we usually refer when we speak of "theory" in interpretation, that is, those theories which do not restrict themselves to the (structural) analysis of language and literature specifically (inter alia, Freudian, Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, theories). So the question I will be discussing in this chapter is: how can such appeals to "big theories" lead to interpretive skepticism?

I will begin my discussion in this chapter by returning to "the hermeneutics of suspicion," and the doubt Susan Sontag leveled against interpretation, in chapter 1. I will then explore the difference between skeptical and non-skeptical appeals to big theories, by linking Sontag's suspicion of hermeneutics to the hermeneutics of suspicion, specifically in the manner it is discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in terms of "paranoid readings." I will also draw upon Cora Diamond's article "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy" in order to articulate a problematic I find central in tracing the difference between skeptical and non-skeptical theoretical interpretations of this kind. This problematic I would like to call, paraphrasing Diamond, the difficulty of interpretation vs. the difficulty of theory. To illustrate these difficulties I shall discuss a few quotes from J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a literary work Diamond also cites in her essay.

What I will suggest is that a form of hermeneutics of suspicion or other variants of paranoid readings – which is to say, interpretations guided by big (suspicious) theories – are *not* skeptical forms of interpretation in and by themselves. Nonetheless, they can *turn* skeptical if they transgress their own interpretive authority. This happens when we allow the theories guiding our interpretations to become authoritarian, dogmatic and imperative. I claim that interpretations appealing to, and relying on, big theories will approach skepticism *if* they treat conflicts over grammatical criteria, rooted in moral/existential/political difficulties of reality, *as if* these were problems that could be authoritatively settled through professional or theoretical *expertise*. I will also suggest that a return to the rough ground of interpretation need not mean a return to "conservative" or traditional ways of reading, nor should it imply a plea for interpretive serenity and consensus. Upon returning you may find that the rough ground is a place where conceptual, moral and exis-

tential difficulties meet and clash. It can be a challenging as well as a comforting place. In any case, returning to it should encompass an acknowledgment that the rough ground is also the place in which our concerns with literature *live*. Furthermore, the rough ground of interpretation is not necessarily a place you reach by avoiding theory. Theories are not *always* routes of escape. Occasionally theories can be exactly what you need in order to return to – or establish – the rough ground.

7.1. Making it Real. Sontag and the Suspicion of Hermeneutics

The examples of Beardsley and Brooks helped to show how interpretive theory, which does not *appear* skeptical at first glance, still can be skeptical when scrutinized. Now, I wish to explore the example of Susan Sontag, who, in light of the previous discussion, may very well *appear* skeptical about interpretation but who, in my view, is not. Or to put the case otherwise, Sontag may very well appear as someone who categorically rejects all forms of interpretation on the ground that she finds *interpretation*, and *interpreters,* to be skeptical by default – skeptical about art.[726] I think this impression becomes stronger once one reads Sontag through Cavell. But in my view this is not the real thrust of Sontag's charge against interpretation. Even if I shall contend that to a certain degree, Sontag follows Brooks, such that a part of Sontag's critique surrounding interpretation can be seen as a version of the critique of interpretive skepticism that I argued we can find in "The Heresy of Paraphrase," I do not read her as claiming that interpretations are impossible or that interpretation, *per se*, expresses a general form of skepticism towards art. What I think Sontag succeeds in highlighting are those possible pitfalls (both theoretical and non-theoretical pitfalls) into which interpretation can lead us. It is by relating these problems to what I will call interpretive appeals to big theories that I will argue that a return to the rough ground of interpretation will not necessarily mean positioning oneself "against" theory.

[726] Someone who does seem to read Sontag along these lines – though not describing her view in terms of skepticism, but indicating instead Sontag's simultaneous affinity with formalism, New Criticism, and close reading – is the "new formalist," Fredric V. Bogel. Bogel registers Sontag's "affirmation of formal analysis" but comments in a footnote how "Sontag's argument is complicated somewhat by her (finally, anti-interpretive and anti-intellectual) assumption that 'interpretation' presupposes the transparency of a work of art and should be opposed by a *non*-interpretive focus on the sensory apprehension of the work." Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism*), p. 22, note 10, p. 190. I do not read Sontag as anti-intellectual and her anti-interpretive stance is, when successful, not a rejection of everything that can be called "interpretation" in my view.

So what in Sontag would make us think that she considers interpretation itself as constituting a kind of skepticism towards art? Here are two quotes from "Against Interpretation":

> The old style of interpretation was insistent, but respectful; it erected another meaning on top of the literal one. The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a subtext which is the true one. The most celebrated and influential modern doctrines, those of Marx and Freud, actually amount to elaborate systems of hermeneutics, aggressive and impious theories of interpretation. All observable phenomena are bracketed, in Freud's phrase, as *manifest content*. This manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning – *the latent content* – beneath.[727]

> [I]nterpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings." It is to turn *the* world into *this* world. ("This world"! As if there were any other.) The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.[728]

These passages, to my ears, *sound* very "Cavellian." But they do so with an almost deceptive twist that I now wish to draw out. We may too easily feel that we recognize the terms of Sontag's critique: the desire to look "behind" a phenomenon (as if penetrating it), the intellect taking its revenge upon the work and on the world, the setting up of a duplicate world, a shadow world which supposedly is the real one – all this we could easily read along the lines of Cavell's critique of the skeptic. It would then sound something like this:

While interpretation can be either "respectful" or "aggressive and impious" – and while the former is at least polite and guided by good intentions, thinking of itself as being in service of the text – both forms want, at the end of the day, to replace the text with a purported *real* meaning (found above or behind or below the text). Interpretation is always a skeptical enterprise which avoids and denies the text; it rejects the text, setting up a shadow world of "meanings" in its stead. Interpretation is inherently skeptical of art in the sense that it posits a "real" object – the content – that usurps the place of the work of art.

According to this picture, the literary interpreter looks very much like the skeptical twin of the external-world skeptic: the one who wants to dig behind the surface of appearances and reveal the true nature of things, denying and rejecting the world by doubling it. If this picture were true, literary interpretation would be inherently skeptical towards literature in the sense that the

[727] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," pp. 6–7.
[728] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 7.

interpreter replaces the work with his or her own interpretation of it. There are several passages in Sontag speaking in favor of such a reading and, perhaps, this is indeed what Sontag meant.[729] Even if something like this is part of Sontag's critique, I would in any case find it highly unlikely that the object of her critique extends to everything that might go by the term "interpretation." Rather, I see in Sontag three distinct but nevertheless intertwined lines of critique, which correspond to three slightly different sets of problems associated with the task of interpretation. *To the extent that I am willing to follow her* (and the extent of this willingness is conditioned by not assuming that an absolute rejection of interpretation is required) I think Sontag's text can be read in a manner less perilous for interpretation as such.

In my reading, Sontag's charges against interpretation, even if taken together, do not amount to an absolute rejection of interpretation. Instead they show us some of its possible shortcomings. Sontag's first critique brings her closest to Brooks; it is akin to Brooks's critique of the heresy of paraphrase. Her second critique targets interpretations guided by big theories (such as Freudian interpretations). The third is a critique addressing a mode of reading practice she thinks has gone stale, because it is no longer capable of bringing art to life for us or making us alive before art. Let me take these in turn and see how they can bring us closer to the rough ground of interpretation.

One thing Sontag clearly targets in her essay is what she takes as an undue focus in criticism on the work's *content*. While Brooks preferably describes this in terms of paraphrases, Sontag links the emphasis placed upon content distinctly to a conception of interpretation: "What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of *interpretation*."[730] This "overemphasis" is furthermore something that Sontag, just like Brooks, sees as the result of a distorted conception of the relation between form and content in art.

> What is "content"? Or, more precisely, what is left of the notion of content when we have transcended the antithesis of style (or form) and content? […] The great task which remains to critical theory is to examine in detail the *formal* function of subject-matter. Until this function is acknowledged and properly explored, it is inevitable that critics will go on treating works of art as "statements."[731]

[729] As when Sontag writes: "The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, *is* altering it. But he can't admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning." Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 6.
[730] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 5.
[731] Sontag, "On Style," p. 20–21. "Whether we conceive of the work of art on the model of a picture (art as a picture of reality) or on the model of a statement (art as the statement of the artist), content still comes first." Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 4.

According to Sontag (and Brooks), this simplified splitting of form from content in art is spurious. Form affects content just as much as content has formal implications. However, if critics treat artworks as more or less decorative "statements" (and neglect form), the interpretation not only tends to be reductive but it furthermore usurps the place of the artwork. If nothing essential is lost when you extract a "statement" from a complex work of art, then we could just as well read the interpretation *instead* of the work. One can thus see that part of Sontag's critique is directed not necessarily against interpretation as such, but against a faulty picture of art *guiding* certain interpretations.[732] This part of Sontag's critique is essentially a paraphrasing of "The Heresy of Paraphrase." Directed at bad – indeed, as I argued in chapter 6, skeptical – pictures of interpretation and art I think this criticism is valid. Nonetheless, such a point does not constitute a critique of *interpretation* so much as a critique of theoretical conceptions of what art essentially is, which in turn can inform bad, reductive, interpretations. This type of critique is already familiar from my reading of Brooks.

Secondly, and here Sontag is no longer just following Brooks, she specifically signals dissatisfaction with interpretations that are based on big theories, such as Freudian or Marxist interpretations. One could say that Sontag here expresses a counter-suspicion about what Ricœur called the "masters of suspicion." This line of criticism is similar to the first in the sense that once more interpretation is considered to consist in a kind of skeptical see-through, that is, a rejection of the work that is *there*, in favor of something that presumably operates behind it. But the target of this critique is not just any kind of heretical paraphrase, but the particular kind that paraphrases according to a specific, wider, theoretical framework or hermeneutical master-code.

> According to Marx and Freud, these events only *seem* intelligible. Actually, they have no meaning without interpretation. To understand *is* to interpret. And to interpret is to restate the phenomenon, in effect to find an equivalent for it.[733]

> Those who reach for a Freudian interpretation […] are only expressing their lack of response to what is there […]. It is always the case that interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else.[734]

It is *this* type of interpretation that is the "aggressive and impious" one – in contrast to the "old style of interpretation" which was merely trying to make a text intelligible. The old type, when guided by a faulty picture of

[732] "Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of its items of content, violates art." Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 10.
[733] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 7.
[734] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 10.

form/content, wanting to unravel the text's true "statements," would exemplify the problematic of the heresy of paraphrase just recounted. This second type of interpretation is also charged with wanting to *replace* the work with "something else" but in a slightly different manner. This kind of interpretation is guided by a system of hermeneutics that will reject any meaning that does not fit a certain explanatory theoretical schemata, the function of which is to make a certain perspective or outlook *mandatory*. It insists not only on interpretation as *the* means of understanding the work, but it furthermore has a set of *pre-given* parameters which such an interpretation must take into account.

Furthermore, this kind of theory's explanatory range typically extends far beyond the area of the literary works or artworks themselves. It is generally not construed merely for the sake of the interpretation of art or of *literary meaning* but for bigger chunks of reality and social life. It may be a theory of the human, say, as an historical-economic being, a psychological subject, or a sexed body. This type of big theory cuts underneath such phenomena we may think we have an ordinary grasp of – as for instance with what it is to be human. Sontag, then, might here strike us as someone who sides with the ordinary, against willful interpretive replacements; a tank rumbling down a street in Bergman's film *The Silence* (1963) should be allowed to remain the rumbling tank it is, Sontag thinks: if Bergman meant it as a phallic symbol" he was "foolish," and critics reaching for such an interpretation are merely demonstrating their own incompetence.[735]

In relation to Brooks this critique focuses on another *type* of theoretical interpretation than one specifically designed to define literary meaning. With this critique of big theories we I am getting closer to the distinction I want to make between how we can appeal to a big theory in interpretation either skeptically or non-skeptically. However, while I think Sontag is really on to something important in her critique of the role of big theories in interpretation – and in part *does* side with the ordinary as opposed to a skeptical form of interpretation – I also think she misses the fruitful, non-skeptical potentialities of big theories. I will return to how I think this happens shortly. First, let me account for what I think is Sontag's third critique of interpretation.

If the first two critiques of "interpretation" are critiques against certain *theoretical conceptions* guiding interpretive practice, (either conceptions of literature and literary meaning, or of a wider theoretical schemata supposedly necessary for interpretation), Sontag's third critique is, I argue, taking place *on* the rough ground of interpretation. If the first two critiques can be described as critiques of interpretation precisely when *it has left* the rough ground through theory, the third indicates another problem or a further possible shortcoming with interpretation not necessarily caused by some theoretical move. This dissatisfaction of Sontag's has not so much to do with

[735] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," pp. 9–10.

interpretation being (theoretically) *misguided* but rather with interpretation as a critical practice having become *stale:*

> Once upon a time (say, for Dante), it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to design works of art so that they might be experienced on several levels. Now it is not. It reinforces the principles of redundancy that is the principle affliction of modern life. Once upon a time (a time when high art was scarce), it must have been a revolutionary and creative move to interpret works of art. Now it is not. What we decidedly do not need now is further to assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture.[736]

Here, the problem is not first and foremost that interpretations are misinformed by theory, or that interpreters are wrongly looking for hidden layers of meaning. The problem is that interpretations have – of late – become predictable, uncreative and *dull*. Once upon a time, Sontag writes, it may have been creative to look for hidden messages underneath the surface of the text, once it had been vitalizing for art, constituting a living response to it. Now however, according to Sontag's diagnosis, this is no longer the case. Interpretation (as she experienced it in 1964) has become automatized, playing into the hands of a culture too prone to intellectualization. Instead of bringing us closer to the artwork, it serves only as an obstacle that blocks us from it: "Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable."[737] By trying to nail down what the artwork means, interpretation threatens to deaden our sensibility to aspects of the work that resist intellectualization: "We must learn to see more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more," Sontag writes.[738] I think it is important to stress that, just like Brooks, Sontag is not saying criticism has become, or is, impossible; rather, that we need (or at the time she thought we needed) a *new* kind of criticism: "I am not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how. What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?"[739]

While not providing us with any doctrines, nor instructing us *how* she thinks this new kind of criticism should be created, Sontag nonetheless does have an idea about what art criticism needs to do – it needs to make art *real* to us once more: "The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art – and, by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less,

[736] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 13.
[737] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 8.
[738] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 14.
[739] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 12. Given the similarity between Sontag and Brooks one is here tempted to say that the *new* criticism she is seeking sounds very much like New Criticism.

real to us."[740] Criticism that *serves* the work (by not trying to "usurp its place") is also a mode of criticism that acknowledges our own passionate, sensual and sensory experiences of it. By doing so *the art* is not only made more real to us; Sontag further claims that through a commitment *to* (as well as the commitments *of*) art, our relation to the *world* may itself be revitalized. Making art real is part of making the world real (again). This in turn makes *us* more real (in relation to both the world and the art).

> To become involved with a work of art entails, to be sure, the experience of detaching oneself from the world. But the work of art itself is also a vibrant, magical, and exemplary object which returns us to the world in some way more open and enriched.[741]

> The overcoming or transcending of the world in art is also a way of encountering the world, and of training or educating the will to be in the world.[742]

Here I think Sontag is working with a similar problematic as the one with which Woolf and Stein struggled in chapter 4. Or perhaps one could say that it is the same problematic seen from the perspective of criticism: they all struggle to make art real again. It is also interesting to compare Sontag's understanding of this task with Beardsley's theoretical attempt to secure the realness, stability and intelligibility of literature through a definition of the literary object. In fact, I believe that Beardsley's procedure is precisely the kind which Sontag would find skeptical. In contrast to him, Sontag believes that making art real requires that we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to it, to be sensitive to its capacity to "make us nervous." An intellectual decoding of art through a pre-given method, schemata, or other worn-out procedure of interpretive practice, Sontag suggests, tends to take for granted that we *already know* in general what kind of lessons an artwork can teach us. Such interpretive practices threaten to stifle whatever fresh, revolutionary, unsettling and life-endowing effect art can have.[743] Thus Sontag, at the end of her essay "Against Interpretation" writes: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."[744]

What I think one can conclude here is first that Sontag is right to point out that interpretations ignorant of formal matters may indeed become reductive.

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[740] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 14. One thing she also stresses is an attentiveness to form: "What is needed is a vocabulary – a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary – for forms." Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 12.
[741] Sontag, "On Style," p. 28.
[742] Sontag "On Style," pp. 30–31.
[743] Particularly on this point, on how predictable appeals to big theories can deaden us to the work, one finds a genuine similarity between Cavell and Sontag, I think. As when Cavell writes that "[a] political reading is apt to become fairly predictable once you know whose side the reader is taking." Stanley Cavell, "*Coriolanus* and Interpretations of Politics," *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 145.
[744] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 14.

Just as I think Brooks has a case in his "The Heresy of Paraphrase," and to the extent Sontag shares his criticism, she is right in being suspicious of spurious conceptions of the form/content distinction. Furthermore, certain theoretical ideas of "meaning" and "content" guiding interpretations can be deemed skeptical, since such ideas foster the conviction that *the real* meaning of a work should be possible to capture in "statements" – as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter on Brooks. But this does not mean that interpretation itself is inherently skeptical in the sense of avoiding, denying or usurping the place of the work. I also think Sontag captures a real and important problem surrounding interpretation through her repudiation of dogmatic interpretive appeals to big theories.[745] Similarly, Sontag is right to point out that interpretations can become automatized, not least through both predictable and dogmatic applications of big theories, but also through merely worn-out (practical) interpretive procedures, all of which can deaden our senses to the richness, sensuality and pleasure of literary works. But as far as I can see all three critiques are critiques of various forms of *poor* interpretations, interpretations that in one way or another have *failed*. Taken together they do not constitute a definitive critique of interpretation, such that all acts of interpretation would become inherently skeptical of art.

This means that I think one can – on the one hand – read Sontag's "Against Interpretation" as not *actually* critiquing (or at least not *succeeding* in its critique of) interpretation *as such*. Rather, the success of Sontag's intervention lay, whether intentionally or not, in targeting certain prominent pitfalls in the task of interpretive practice, namely instances of theoretical escapism, theoretical dogmatism and critical staleness. I take these problems to be analogous with the possibility of overinterpretation (something I discussed at the end of chapter 5), in the sense that all are risks inherent in criticism, and, as immanent possibilities, they should, I believe, be dealt with, when actualized, *piecemeal*. I will develop my thoughts on these matters in the following sections on Diamond and Sedgwick. Having said this, to the extent that Sontag really wants to criticize *interpretation per se*, (though, if this is the case, she does so, in my view, unsuccessfully), I shall challenge such an attempt by raising two sets of critical questions of my own.

First, I think we should ask ourselves whether the revitalization which Sontag seeks – a criticism which at one and the same time makes both art and the world more *real* to us while making us more intimately alive and sensitive to them – could not also, and sometimes substantially so, come about precisely *through* interpretation? That is, not only through a renewed attention to form and sensual qualities in literary works (the possibility of which an overemphasis on content may foreclose), but also through the effort to *make sense* of the works in a new way? Will such sense-making nec-

[745] How this problem of theoretical dogmatism can be related to skepticism is something I will return to in my discussion of Sedgwick and paranoid readings later in this chapter.

essarily become domesticating or reductive? Could that not equally well be a way of taking seriously the injunction of "making it real"? One way a work can alienate us is precisely by closing itself to our comprehension. If this is indeed the case then is not its resistance to interpretation one important way in which an artwork can seem, as it were, unreal and irrelevant?

Secondly, and related to this expressed need to reinstall a sense of realness and vitality in our relation to art and the world: do interpretations informed by big theories *always* go looking beyond or behind the work? Is it true that such interpretations are always neglecting what is *there* in favor of something *else*? May such interpretations not sometimes help us see precisely what *is* in the work and to afford us the possibility of seeing the world in a new and vitalizing way? Could not theoretical interpretations also have the capacity to make many critics and readers "nervous" in the desired way? Is the dissatisfaction with what presents itself as the work's most common, normal, or ordinary meaning *never* warranted? What if the art that I encounter describes either me or a group to which I belong, in an alienating or exoticizing way and that a big theory becomes the means at my disposal to reinsert myself into the world in a way that does not render me, the world, or the artwork, utterly unintelligible and unenduring? Could not the recourse to theory help to make the world (as if there were any other) more real (again)? In such circumstances could theory not be just as good a way of "training or educating the will to be in the world" and therefore interpretation a procedure "which returns us to the world in some way more open and enriched"?

What I wish to suggest with these questions is that if we are to take seriously art's "capacity to make us nervous," as Sontag says we should, then we ought equally to take seriously the nervousness or anxiety of interpretation, which more often than not informs such an encounter; the vulnerability of interpretation is part of our vulnerability to art. A sense of realness and intimacy, which we can establish with, say, a literary work, and in turn, the sense of realness and vividness this encounter can bring about in intensifying our relation with the world, is often deeply conditioned by our ability to make sense of that work, and our capacity to *share* that sense with others. Part of this anxiety here stems from the fact that sharedness, intimacy and intelligibility are not things we are *always* able to produce through our interpretive efforts. This in turn brings me to what I take to be a central part of "the difficulty of interpretation": that the vulnerability of interpretation is also a vulnerability of our shared intelligibility. This difficulty addresses the fact that our common ground of interpretive understanding occasionally loses its stability and width. That the supposedly shared ground from which my interpretation should speak sometimes seems to allow no space for me. The nervousness or anxiety induced through this difficulty speaks to the possibility that my interpretation can also isolate me. Not only, as I tried to show in chapter 6, in ways which modernist works (or other literary hard cases) can exclude me, so that I cannot get inside of them, I do not "get it"

while others seemingly – thus the suspicion of fraudulence – "get it." But I also think that this kind of nervousness and anxiety can arise in situations in which I, to some extent, sense what they "get," and yet I cannot fully understand or acknowledge that myself because what *that* is, is threatening, intolerable, abusive; a world of horror read *as* merely mundane, or as a vague background hum, or perhaps even as something beautiful or attractive, like a dark alluring song. To see *this* as *that*, to be or not to be able to see something *as* something is not always merely a matter of "pure" cognition. Neither is the concern always restricted to the field of aesthetics – or more to the point – neither are the aesthetical concerns always reducible to the mere aesthetical (if there even is such a thing).

Aestheticized cruelty, for instance, can take many forms in literature, some of which one may be willing or capable to try out imaginatively. Art and the encounters with art should be able to try out moral boundaries – it should, as Sontag said, "make us nervous." Other imaginative projections of this sort exceed our boundaries. One can here think of the ancient torture device known as the bronze bull. What mad acts of avoidance would it take to accept this instrument of torture *as* an instrument of *music*? What monstrous attitude would we have to embody in order even to *try* and hear the beauty of the "music" (and *not* the manipulated sounds of agonizing screams of people being roasted to death inside)? What if a bronze bull was construed that really "worked," i.e. somehow produced gorgeous sounds to the ear; would it then be possible /admissible /conceivable /imaginable to appreciate or acknowledge merely the "aesthetic" aspect of that sound *while* knowing what those sounds *were*? Or would that be a perversion of what acknowledgment is, and instead constitute a failure to acknowledge the torture? Could the relation between torture and beauty (or "beauty") *merely* be viewed as a *causal* one (and one possible to sever within aesthetic contemplation)? It would in any case hardly be an *intentional* relation from the perspective of those "singing." So as to be able to listen to this sound in an *aesthetic way* one would have to deny tremendous things one knows about that situation. But then, of course, a *fictive* bronze bull and a *real* bronze bull are radically different things, and *fictivity* radically reorganizes the conditions and boundaries in question. Fictivity alters how aesthetic and moral issues can be interrelated and what we take ourselves to be able to do, imagine, and be complicit in, while all the while seeing something *as* something. Which is not to say that a fictive bull cannot both speak truthfully of, as well as cause, real pain in the world. What I *can* read and see, and am willing to see, also reads me back, exposes me.[746] My interpretation can isolate me in the same

[746] At this point one may want to recall Nietzsche's words that "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you." Friedrich Nietzsche, aphorism 146, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886), transl. R. J. Hollingdale (1973), reprinted and with an Introduction by Michael Tanner (Penguin Books, London, 1990), p. 102.

way that my claim to be hearing a scream *as* a scream of pain can render me an idiot, or party-pooper, or a bore, by those claiming to hear something else, say, a scream of pleasure or ecstasy.

7.2. The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Interpretation. Diamond, Costello, and the Vulnerability of Interpretive Claims

"The difficulty of interpretation" is a difficulty rooted in what I would call the ultimate groundlessness of the rough ground of interpretation. It is a problematic emanating from a condition of the rough ground of interpretation which indeed can make us nervous: beyond the common ground of interpretation – upon which we try to make our interpretive claims intelligible and valid to each other – we have no appeal to any further, more fundamental, ground, which would ultimately secure our mutual sense-making were our interpretive attempts to fail.[747] If the validity of my interpretive claim resides in what I succeed in making others see by it, that is, if the proof, so to say, is in the pudding, and you cannot make out the sense I claim we can see in a certain passage of a text, then – to paraphrase Wittgenstein – if I have exhausted justification and reached bedrock, and my spade is turned, then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I see."[748] If I have already exhausted all my interpretive, expressive, resources to the best of my ability, and have nothing more to say – then there is no further or *ultimate* authority to which I can appeal in order to *force* you to see what I see.

This may on the whole present itself as a pretty undramatic thing. Why should the fact that any ultimate authority is lacking induce anxiety? If I cannot see what you see and you cannot see what I see in a particular novel or poem, or other literary object then so what? This occasionally happens, as we all know. Why should that fact trouble us? And yet I am not claiming that it *should* trouble us, I am merely saying that it occasionally *does*, and that when it does – due to the intimate connection between the sense of realness and meaningfulness in art, in the world, and in myself, which Sontag (in part) indexes – this can have painful consequences. Consequences we may wish to avoid by making escapes to theory. I will in this section try and explicate more fully what I mean with "the difficulty of interpretation" by viewing it in light of a similar and related problematic, namely the problem Cora Diamond describes as "the difficulty of reality."

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[747] I am here thinking of interpretations relying on my "Wittgensteinian" or grammatical authority to make claims as to what something can mean, how it can make sense.

[748] "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'" Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 217, p. 72e.

The difficulty of reality is a kind of problem we can come across when something in reality shoulders us out of language, or shoulders language out of us.[749] When we strike upon something our mind seems unable to wrap itself around, and we feel that we fail to fully understand that thing or are incapable of expressing it satisfactorily.

> [T]he difficulty of reality […] is a phrase of John Updike's, which I want to pick up for the phenomena with which I am concerned, experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability. *We take things so*. And the things we take so may simply not, to others, present the kind of difficulty, of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one's mind around.[750]

One important feature of this difficulty is precisely that such an experience need not be *shared* by others. *We take things so*. And while *I*, for whom this difficulty opens itself up, feel that my mind and my words fail to encompass this particular phenomenon (be it because it strikes me as horrifying, or wonderful, breathtaking in beauty or terror) somebody else might be left completely untouched by it. He or she does *not take things so*.

According to Diamond, this is precisely the kind of difficulty that philosophy has a tendency to misconstrue. Either philosophy tends to not notice or appreciate these difficulties of reality at all or it tends to see them in the wrong way. And something essential gets lost when a "difficulty of reality" is transformed into a "difficulty of philosophy." This troublesome issue is something Diamond articulates with appeal to Cavell's notion of "deflection," namely the tendency to turn such deeply wounding problems into mere theoretical puzzles.[751] As an example of such a failure Diamond cites certain, predominantly philosophical interpretations of a text (or texts) by J.M. Coetzee: two lectures Coetzee delivered as part of his Tanner Lectures, and that are collected in the volume *The Lives of Animals* (1999). These texts form a story about the fictive, elderly, female novelist, Elizabeth Costello, and include, in turn, two lectures given by her as an invited speaker at Appleton College. These lectures are embedded in a frame-story about Costello

[749] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 99.
[750] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 99.
[751] Niklas Forsberg has a very interesting and illuminating reading of Diamond's article in chapter 5 of his *Language Lost and Found,* pp. 187–210. In this chapter, Forsberg problematizes Diamond's distinction, and argues that it may invite a misunderstanding that makes the separation between the problems of reality and the problems of philosophy too strict and quite "un-Diamondian." Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found*, p. 193. Forsberg claims that to the extent we have a problem of reality we also – already – have a problem of (or for) philosophy. "Philosophy" need not be synonymous with certain contemporary, academic, analytical philosophical tradition, which indeed, Forsberg argues, has a tendency to (illegibly) ignore these problems. The fact that a certain dominant group in academic philosophy would not consider these problems of reality to be problems *of philosophy* does not stop them from being precisely that.

and her family, especially about her relation to her son and his wife. The interpretations, which Diamond challenges, are included in the volume *The Lives of Animals*.[752] Subsequently, Coetzee's lectures became part of his novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).

What Diamond focuses on particularly in these texts is the first of Costello's lectures, "The Philosophers and the Animals," as well as Costello's conversation with her audience and her son that ensued afterwards. In her speech Costello compares herself to Red Peter, the ape in Kafka's story "Report to an Academy." Red Peter is shot, captured, and then is trained to be a human in possession of both human speech and manners. Now he is invited to give a lecture on his experience of being, *or* rather, of having been, an ape. (The ambivalence surrounding this point is one of the central things the reader is invited to reflect upon in the story.) However, Red Peter tells his audience that this he cannot do. Humanized as he is now, his former ape-life has become distant and inaccessible. He will not be able to tell his fellow humans (or "fellow humans") what it is like to be an ape, since he no longer really knows himself.[753] Analogously, Costello struggles with the task of communicating to her audience something she cannot really fit into her mind, namely what she understands as the mind-boggling cruelty the human species exercises over other animals. That she fails to win her audience over (at least those that are given voice in the story, including her own son), is something which the story reveals to us as well. Whether she succeeds in communicating what she wants to us readers is of course a different matter.

Early on in her speech, Costello seeks to guide her audience about *how* her words should be received, saying: "I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak."[754] A substantial part of Diamond's critique of how this text has been received regards how readers of Coetzee's text have, just as Costello's audience, ignored that Costello speaks, not as philosopher who tries to convince us by the strictness of arguments that cruelty to animals is *wrong*, but as a woman *wounded* by a horrible and unbearable knowledge of this cruelty. Diamond describes the failure of previous commentators to adequately appreciate this problem in the following way:

> I want to describe Coetzee's lectures, then, as presenting a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves. What wounds this woman,

[752] J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. and introduced by Amy Gutmann, including reflections by, Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, Barbara Smuts, The Univeristy Center for Human Values Series, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).
[753] Franz Kafka, "A Report to an Academy," transl. Willa and Edwin Muir, *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 250–259.
[754] J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2003), pp. 70–71.

> what haunts her mind, is what we do to animals. This, in all its horror, is there, in our world. How is it possible to live in the face of it? And in the face of the fact that, for nearly everyone, it is as nothing, as the mere accepted background of life? […] I say that this is how I want to describe Coetzee's lectures; but it is not how the commentators on the lectures describe them. Amy Gutmann, in her introductory essay, sees Coetzee as confronting the ethical issue of how human beings should treat animals, and as presenting, within a fictional frame, arguments that are meant to support one way of resolving the issue. Peter Singer also reads Coetzee as having been engaged in the presenting of arguments within the frame of a fiction […]. The fact that the arguments are those of a character in a story he sees as simply making it possible for Coetzee to distance himself to some degree from them and to avoid taking full intellectual responsibility for them.[755]

Interestingly enough, since I have been concerned with discussing the work of Brooks and Beardsley, Diamond's critique of readings of Costello's lecture is a critique that can be seen as a variation on both "The Heresy of Paraphrase" and "The Intentional Fallacy." I also think that Diamond's critical intervention bears witness to what were, and still are, valid points made by both Brooks and Beardsley. Diamond's dissatisfaction with previous readings of Coetzee's text is not only that they fail to see what she takes to be the central problem of Costello's speech, namely the nature and conditions of her *woundedness*, but that they fail to do so precisely because they fail to treat the text as a piece of *literature*.[756]

First, these readings commit the heresy of paraphrase by "pulling out ideas and arguments as if they had been simply clothed in fictional form as a way of putting them before us."[757] Second, Diamond complains that "[t]he trouble with that view of what we may learn from the lectures is that it is fixed entirely on Elisabeth Costello's view, and implicitly identifies it as Coetzee's."[758] Thus we have an instance of the intentional fallacy. In short, Diamond claims that if we think that Coetzee is here presenting arguments *for* vegetarianism and *against* cruelty towards animals in fictional and aesthetically appealing literary form, then not only do we risk concentrating unduly on *Coetzee* (and what he thinks and wants), or on what would be the proper "philosophical" way of arguing about such issues; but we are likely to miss the rich description of what it means for a person to be in a state of

[755] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 100.
[756] However, Diamond is rather careful concerning what she thinks it means to read something "as literature." Her point is first and foremost of a negative nature. Nonetheless, I think one can clearly see that what she charges these readings with is the heresy of paraphrase: "I am not sure how helpful it is to say 'Coetzee's lectures have to be read first of all as literature,' because it is not clear what is meant by reading them as literature. But what is meant not to be done is at least somewhat clear: not pulling out ideas and arguments as if they had simply been clothed in fictional form as a way of putting them before us." Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 102.
[757] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 102.
[758] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 103.

woundedness – or as Diamond also calls it – of someone struggling with a *difficulty of reality*.

One of the best passages affording a vivid insight into what this woundedness means for Elizabeth Costello is when her son John is driving her to the airport, after she has given her lectures. As they sit alone in the car, John admits he had not realized how deeply she felt about the whole "animal business." His mother explains that she has not dared to talk to him about it, because her words "seem so outrageous that they are best spoken into a pillow or into a hole in the ground, like King Midas.'" This answer puzzles her son: "I don't follow," he says, "What is it that you can't say?" Costello replies as follows:

> It's that I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad! Yet every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money. […] Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this? Yet I'm not dreaming. I look into your eyes, into Norma's, into the children's, and I see only kindness, human kindness. Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*[759]

What is striking about this passage is how the difficulty of reality is closely related to the problem of skepticism. We recognize the words: Am I dreaming? Am I fantasizing it all? No, I have the proof! Yet, Costello does not turn her problem into a theoretical puzzle; she does not turn into a skeptic. Although the difficulty with which she struggles is expressed in similar words to the skeptic, the problem here is existential and moral, not merely intellectual. Indeed, this is how she herself conceives of the problem; Costello refuses to give *arguments* for her "view." For her, this is obviously not a matter that depends on, or can be settled through, intellectual debate. That would be to misunderstand what type of difficulty the cruelty against animals constitutes.

Diamond, noticing this, reminds us how "Cavell has […] traced connections and relations between, on the one hand, the multifarious forms in which we take in or try to take in or resist taking in that difficulty of reality that he refers to most often as separateness and, on the other hand, skepticism."[760] Costello's difficulty surrounding reality as a difficulty related to our separateness shows itself through her predicament of finding herself alone and unintelligible in and to the world. She finds herself in a situation where those closest to her – in whose eyes she cannot see monsters, "only human

[759] Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, pp. 114–115.
[760] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 108.

kindness" – are at the same time, for all she knows, without wincing "participants in a crime of stupefying proportions." The world must be mad. Or they must be mad. Or she must be mad. It is in any case an unendurable situation; the world appears to crumble beneath her feet. This of course accounts for why she has been afraid to talk about this with her son; she suspects she will not be intelligible to him. And she is not. She has spoken in her lecture (which her son also attended) to the best of her ability, attempting to make the cruelty she sees *there*, in the world, visible and intelligible to her audience, but, alas, she does not succeed in transmitting to others the exigency and significance of this issue. Her claims to intelligibility and mutual understanding are rejected.

Now, am I here saying that the figure of Costello provides an example of "the difficulty of interpretation"? Does Costello *interpret* what we do to animals differently than, say, her son or her daughter-in-law? No, here I acquiesce with Diamond, who writes that "'perspective' is too general a term for the rawness of nerves" Costello exhibits.[761] In a similar vein, I will say that "interpretation" is likewise a too "superficial" term for the sense of *depth* with which this vision of how we live with animals marks Costello as a being in the world. Put otherwise: I find it potentially shallow and misleading to say that Costello is *interpreting* what we do to animals *as* cruelty while her son and daughter-in-law do not. On such a premise, the entire sense of a world crumbling under an unacknowledged "crime of stupefying proportions" would disappear. Besides, the kind of "difficulty of interpretation" I am interested in is a difficulty pertaining to *literary* interpretation. If Costello were described as "interpreting" something here it would be the world.

However, the difficulty of interpretation not only shares some important features with the difficulty of reality as Diamond describes it, rather, in a stronger sense, the problems of interpretation can be *rooted* in such difficulties of reality. On occasions, the difficulty of interpretation encompasses the struggle to grasp something you feel that, at least initially, your mind, is not fully capable of taking in but which nonetheless you try to articulate and communicate to others. I think this type of struggle, while not limited to, is especially present in the interpretation of certain forms of poetry.[762] This in

[761] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 101. Diamond writes this as a response to Amy Gutmann's description of the conflict in the text between Costello and the Jewish poet Abraham Stern. Stern has walked out of Costello's lecture when she compared what goes on in the slaughter-houses with the Holocaust. A comparison he finds blasphemous, and an insult to "the memory of the dead." Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, p. 94. Gutmann describes this in terms of the difficulty of understanding one another's "perspectives."

[762] I think many readers of poetry recognize this kind of struggle and I believe Brooks in part tried to capture this sense when he spoke of the language of paradox and the heresy of paraphrase. It testifies to the fact that this struggle to "grasp" the poem is closely related to the second similarity: the difficulty of trying to express what your see in the poem with your own

turn relates to the condition of separateness that informs the interpreter as well: you seeing *this* like *that* is a way of comprehending something that may or may not be shared. The difficulty of interpretation thus shares the possibility of isolation once one's claim to intelligibility has been rejected by others. It is with respect to this point that I wish to draw attention to when Costello ponders on the possibility that she might be "making a mountain out of a molehill." If one transposes this anxiety to the area of interpretation I think one can see two important sets of problems pertaining to what I have called the nervousness or anxiety of literary interpretation.

First, anxiety about "making a mountain out of a molehill" can be seen as an anxiety of *overinterpretation* or *overreading*. This is a particular problematic I addressed in chapter 5: "Am I reading-in too much?" In this context I would like to characterize an anxiety regarding overinterpretation as one concerning specific, singular cases. Am I making a mountain out of a molehill *now*? Is *this* reading an over-reading?

The second kind of nervousness this expression can be taken to articulate may be summed up by the question: "Am I being *paranoid*?" With this question I want to focus on a problematic that does not speak to singular cases of interpretation or the risk of individual overinterpretations. The anxiety of paranoia concerns a more general issue of a manner, or way, of interpreting. It is particularly concerning this problematic, the problem of paranoia, that I would like to relate Costello's difficulty of reality to interpretations appealing to big theories, and how such appeals may or may not be skeptical.

While I do not see Costello's "view" or way of looking at our relation to animals as itself constituting an "interpretation," this kind of deeply wounding difficulty of reality may nonetheless significantly *inform* how we interpret literature, and thus become part of the difficulty of interpretation in a special way. Such difficulties can be the place where my interpretive work begins, where it has its *roots*. For me, as a vegetarian, Costello's horror and sense of unbearable alienation is not "unintelligible" at all. *We take things so*. And were I to shift the problem to another issue one would find a similar sense of an unendurable, wounding, world. Taking a familiar example, what feminist has not, at least occasionally, felt the world to be mad? How is it possible that expressions of cruel, objectifying, denials of women's subjectivity be considered otherwise as "sexy," perhaps even "empowering" portraits of women? For instance a person you love, a person sitting next to you, in whose eyes you see only kindness, love and respect, might at the same time find it pleasurable and arousing to watch things, or do things, that you cannot help but see as part of a global, heartbreaking, structure of hate and degradation of women? How can those two things – the love and the equality on the one hand, as well as the impersonal cruelty on the other – coexist in

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words. Which words could possibly capture the beauty and magic of a poem – except the poem itself?

the one person? What if this inner diremption takes place within you? What if your knowledge of the horrible oppression of women – in images, books, in our minds and our bodies and present everywhere in our societies – clashes with your desires, or simply with what the rest of the world (including yourself, at times) takes as perfectly "normal" and ordinary? The world is split in two, and so are you. And what feminist, or non-white contester of racism, or transgender activist, or homosexual opponent of homophobia, etc., has not heard: You see structures everywhere, you read too much into this or that, you are being paranoid, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. And yet, every day you see the evidence. This is life. But you cannot come to terms with it. Should you? *Why should you?*

7.3. Interpretive Skepticism and Interpretive Paranoia. Sedgwick and Reading for Survival

For me, Costello is not incomprehensible; she is not "making a mountain out of a molehill." I suppose, too, that she will not be incomprehensible to many other readers. What she fails to communicate to her audience during her lecture, she may succeed in communicating to unknown numbers of readers of Coetzee's novel. To return to my critique of Sontag: to have the urge to reach for something *behind* the story, even to have the "wish to replace" what it says (on the surface), to be "dissatisfied" with it, does not necessarily mean that one denies "what is there" in a skeptical way. It does not necessarily constitute a "lack of response" to the work. This rejection or dissatisfaction can be, for instance, existential or political and progressive. It can express a hunger for change because the reality as it is now – or according to certain descriptions and prejudices that many seem disturbingly content with – is not to be endured. This does not necessarily mean that such readers create a ghost-world of ideas or ideals, which they project onto or behind the work. It can also mean either revealing structures that *are* real and present in the work, or creating hopeful new images that can *become* real. I am now thinking of the traditions of Marxism, Freudianism, feminism, queer readings, post-colonialism – in other words big theories – that have informed literary interpretations of this kind, but, at the same time, constitute the very examples Sontag had trenchantly critiqued.

In this context, what I have wanted to show is how a similar tension can be found between what I call "the difficulty of interpretation" and "the difficulty of theory" with what Diamond had sought to index by drawing a contrast between "the difficulty of reality" and "the difficulty of philosophy." What is at stake for me is to ascertain the extent to which appeals to big theories in literary interpretation may or may not become skeptical through a similar kind of deflection. Here, I think, Eve Sedgwick's discussion of "par-

anoid readings" in relation to the hermeneutics of suspicion will prove helpful.[763]

In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," Sedgwick discusses what she takes to be an unfortunate tendency in literary and cultural criticism of late. In short, the problem she sees is an inclination toward a kind of theoretical dogmatism regarding how we should treat the insights brought to us by the "masters of suspicion." In her opinion, instead of viewing suspicion as *one* possible hermeneutical strategy, contemporary theory has turned suspicion into *the* hermeneutic mode of reading. Sedgwick writes:

> Ricoeur introduced the category of the hermeneutics of suspicion to describe the position of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their intellectual offspring in a context that also included such alternative disciplinary hermeneutics as the philological and theological "hermeneutics of recovery of meaning." His intent in offering the former of these formulations was descriptive and taxonomic rather than imperative. In the context of recent U.S. critical theory, however, where Marx Nietzsche, and Freud by themselves are taken as constituting a pretty sufficient genealogy for the mainstream of New Historicist, deconstructive, feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic criticism, to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities.[764]

The problem Sedgwick finds in contemporary followers of the hermeneutics of suspicion – the paranoid readers with their appeals to big (suspicious) theories in their interpretive work – is not the fact that they are suspicious, but that this hermeneutics has become "a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities." It is in relation to this tendency toward *dogmatic suspicion* that Sedgwick introduces the concept of paranoia: "The imperative framing will do funny things to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Not surprisingly, the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia."[765]

Now, as I think Sedgwick underlines, theoretical and readerly "paranoia" can be warranted, as many suppressed groups can testify to: "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're *not* out to get you."[766] Significantly, I

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[763] I thank Peik Ingman for pointing out to me the relevance of Sedgwick's text. Jonathan Culler also has an interesting text that links overinterpretation to paranoia. In chapter 7 of *The Literary in Theory* (2007) "Interpretation: Defending 'Overinterpretation'" Culler returns to his, Rorty's and Eco's debate about interpretation and overinterpretation. This text is interesting in its own right, especially in how it maneuvers within the relations between interpretation, overinterpretation, poetics and structural analysis. However, a detailed discussion of Culler's arguments would take me too far away from the concerns that animate this chapter. See *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 166–182.
[764] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," pp. 124–125.
[765] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 125.
[766] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 127.

would further add, paranoid readings – sustained in and through appeals to big, suspicious theories – can often be rooted in different forms of lived "difficulties of reality." They often speak to/of/from experiences of cruelty, exclusion, of being rendered incomprehensible, of being unacknowledged as a full human subject. Big theories anchored in such experiences can in interpretive contexts challenge dominant narratives; they have the capacity to change what one is *able* to see in literary texts and thereby alter the kinds of interpretations it is possible to make. However, as Sedgwick points out: "Paranoia knows some things well and others poorly."[767] For one thing, Sedgwick calls for caution regarding the progressive hopes for *change* in which certain interpretive theories invest. Paranoid readings that seek to rid us from say, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, etc., may be almost paradoxically over-confident about what theory and *knowledge* can accomplish. It has a tendency, Sedgwick notes, to put too much faith in the act of *exposure*:

> Whatever account it may give of its own motivation, paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se – knowledge in the form of exposure. […] That a fully initiated listener could still remain indifferent or inimical, or might have no help to offer, is hardly treated as a possibility. It's strange that a hermeneutics of suspicion would appear so trusting about the effects of exposure, but Nietzsche (through the genealogy of morals), Marx (through the theory of ideology), and Freud (through the theory of ideals and illusions) already represent in Ricoeur's phrase "convergent procedures of demystification" […] and therefore a seeming faith, inexplicable in their own terms, in the effects of such a proceeding.[768]

In this context, let me return to Costello's predicament once more and to her reasons for thinking that intellectual argumentation is insufficient and fails to understand and communicate the horror involved in our treatment of animals. Presumably it is not the case that Costello's speech fails to do what she wants it to do because she omitted some vital facts – as if these people did not already *know* what takes place in the slaughterhouses. This also means that the audience's inability to understand her does not consist in a failure on their part to take in information. The difference between Costello and her son (and the rest of her audience) cannot be fully captured in terms of *knowledge*. Their entire attitude toward, as well as their respective concern with and relation to, the phenomenon at hand are different. These differences cannot be bridged solely by the addition of new facts, or by means of a refined set of arguments and even clearer logic. But if she does not think that exposure of facts will bring about a change in her audience – if she does not think *if only they knew they would stop* – then why is she speaking to them at

[767] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 130.
[768] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," pp. 138–139.

all?[769] If she does not want to tell them something, what are her reasons for saying what she says in the way she says it?

This question highlights different ways one can respond to the predicament of paranoia. Or rather, it highlights different ways one can respond to situations where *others* (perhaps the majority) find you paranoid, and you yourself find the world (or them) mad. Here I think Cavell's discussion on knowledge and acknowledgment is once again appropriate and speaks to Sedgwick's discussion of paranoia. Not least since Sedgwick herself explicitly links paranoid theory to skepticism. For Sedgwick the link is established through paranoia's *anticipatory* stance, its fear of painful surprises: "the aversion to surprise seems to be what cements the intimacy between paranoia and knowledge per se, including both epistemophilia and skepticism."[770] I am here thinking of how our tragic inability to articulate the difficulties of our separateness (which wounds us), so easily invites a deflection, that is, a skeptical way of turning this woundedness into theoretical puzzles. As in the case of other-minds skepticism: "I am filled with this feeling – of our separateness, let us say – and I want you to have it too. So I give voice to it. And then my powerlessness presents itself as ignorance – a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack."[771] As an example of how this can happen in big theories, I think Sedgwick's reference to Judith Butler, as someone who is prone to put too much faith in knowledge and exposure, is particularly instructive:

> In the influential final pages of *Gender Trouble*, for example, Butler offers a programmatic argument in favor of demystification as "the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice" (124), with such claims as that "drag implicitly *reveals* the imitative structure of gender itself" (137); "we see sex and gender *denaturalized* by means of a performance" (138); "gender parody *reveals* that the original identity… is an imitation" (138); "gender performance will *enact and reveal* the performativity of gender itself" (139); "parodic repetition… *exposes* the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity" (141); the parodic repetition of gender *exposes* … the illusion of gender identity" (146); and "hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural'… *reveal* its fundamentally phantasmatic sta-

[769] With this I do not mean to indicate that facts are entirely irrelevant to – or can *never* have a radical impact on – someone's understanding of and attitude toward this type of problem. Nor do I wish to deny that to acquire more adequate *knowledge* about a phenomenon under scrutiny is often highly important if one wishes to morally assess it. And of course, one may also make sure to avoid contact with certain facts or documentations about some phenomenon that would require one to reassess one's relation to it. Certainly footages and videos from slaughterhouses can be very effective in changing some people's attitudes toward the meat industry, for example.

[770] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 130. This can be contrasted with Bogel's contention that "[c]entral to the New Formalist undertaking […] is the possibility of surprise as a sustained hermeneutic expectation and a faith in the significative potential of forms." Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism*, p. 170.

[771] Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," p. 263. Also quoted in Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," p. 109.

tus" (147) as well as "*exposing* its fundamental unnaturalness" (149; all emphasis added).[772]

Concerning Butler, one may ask: what kind of status and authority are her theoretical results supposed to have? I am not merely asking how they are to be related to our understanding of what gender and sex are – how these concepts and words should be understood – but also in relation to the difficulties with which marginalized groups struggle on a daily basis? Even if some of us would grant that her account of how gender and sex are created through performative actions is theoretically convincing or plausible, how does that help us rid ourselves of homophobia or gender inequality in society? Is it *knowledge* of the ontological status of sexual difference that the sexist or homophobe predominantly lacks? Will a *theory* dismantle the hate, the disgust, the rejection? I am not saying that it might not. Perhaps it indeed has such an affect on people of a strong intellectual bent who become convinced by Butler's arguments.[773] But in general, is a theory the most persuasive means of changing people's lives and attitudes towards others? Does such change not include, shall we say, a change of *heart*, that is, a different way of placing yourself (whether imaginatively or actually) among these other people, of thinking of yourself and those others as fellow beings, sharing a common (human) fate?

I am not saying that the most effective or "natural" way such changes in attitude or "heart" can come about is through real life encounters; or through reading literature which deals with and (claims to) make intelligible the sufferings of oppressed groups; or that interpretation of such literature can enhance this change and comprehension in a *specifically* helpful way – nor concomitantly would I deny that any of these things could possibly have emancipatory effects. What I do want to say, though, is that theories like Butler's may have effects even if they are *not* necessarily accepted or vindicated as philosophically or theoretically "correct" in all matters. That her raising of these issues, just like many other "paranoid" theories, can simply make us aware of the fact that we can think differently about sex, gender, and sexuality than we are presently accustomed to. That such imaginative rethinking in dialogue with theories – and also with theories that one partially or even wholly rejects for theoretical reasons – may still bring about a kind of "Gestalt-switch" in how one perceive these things, *what* one is capable of thinking about them. These theories may help us to *see* something that was previously invisible and unrecognizable. They can invite us to try out new imaginative projections of words, which had formerly only been tried out within certain confined contexts – both in real life and in literature.

[772] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 139.
[773] But then again, not that many would *read* Butler if they were not already interested in, or at least willing to be, thinking about these issues from the start.

Irrespective of whether one finds Butler's theory intellectually and argumentatively convincing, I think it can still be acknowledged that it deals with *real* issues, real problems causing real woundedness in the world. The theory may help us see *new* things, as well as to help us make sense of (new or old) things that were *denied* sense. Twenty years ago, for example, I would not have felt it as easy, or as un-problematic – that is, as fully *making sense* – to call a girl with a penis a "girl." From the standpoint of the present, though, I have no difficulty of doing so. It is not just something I *say* and yet secretly believe to be false (though I still go on to say it anyway so as not to hurt someone's feelings). I want to say that I have *realized* that there happen to exist in the world also little girls not born with a vagina, who do not have one now, who may never have one, but who nonetheless are girls. In one sense I can be said to have "known" that before (though I did not fully *believe* it). But now it is something that does not create a difficulty for me to think it; I can now acknowledge this is how things are. That the word "girl" can make perfect sense projected onto that particular XY-chromosome body. There is no gap, no stutter, in me saying this. For me, the grammatical criteria of "girl" have changed slightly. Not because I have accepted a theory, that is, not because it was revealed to me that sex was performative all along, but because I have learned to see the *girls* in these girls. Change occurred and the word came to fit.

But I also know that for many people this phenomenon still does *not* make sense. They may either *say* "girl" about such a child (out of sympathy) or they may refuse to, finding it revolting or absurd. They cannot project the word "girl" onto such a body. For them it might be as nonsensical as calling pouring milk into a parking meter "feeding."[774] They cannot follow me (or us) in making that projection. For them the projection fails. Now, of such a person, should it be said that I, or perhaps Butler, know the meaning, the ordinary meaning, *our* common meaning of the word "girl" better than him or her? Does one need to acquire *expert* knowledge, obtained through theory, to know what this word *really* means, and is the other person who lacks such knowledge simply *wrong*? If he or she simply did his or her intellectual homework and read and understood, for example, Butler correctly, would this person now *know* that the word "girl" can be just as well projected onto a child with a penis as a child with a vagina? Are people who have not studied Butler (or some other theoretical authority) in fact *ignorant* of what the word they have used since childhood actually means, and thus do not possess the requisite authority to use it?

No. This is what I take to be part of the painful, heartbreaking, difficulty of reality. It is not the case that such a native speaker simply lacks adequate knowledge and the authority to use a given word. This person has (in principle) as much grammatical authority as I do, or, for that matter, as Butler

[774] This was one of the examples used in chapter 2 of failed projections of the word "feed."

does, to say what *our* common word "girl" means. That is not what I believe to be missing in such a case. The problem is not so much a problem of knowledge but rather a problem of *acknowledgement.* A person who cannot see a human being who has transformed from say, a woman to a man, *as now really being a man* (and not a mutilated woman) is not (necessarily) an incompetent speaker. The "incompetence," if that is the right word, lies elsewhere. I do not hereby deny that gender- and queer theorists – as well as physicians, biologists, primatologists, sociologists, historicists and psychologists, etc. – have *more* knowledge and *more* authority as experts within their designated fields, of the nature of sexed human beings than the average person who has not devoted years of thought and study to that issue. Nor do I deny that consulting such expertise can change what we think about sex and gender on an everyday basis: that it can influence our spontaneous projections of these words and how we can make sense of them in our everyday lives.[775]

However, mere appeals to expert – i.e. intellectual, academic – *authority* will not deprive people of *their* authority over the grammatical criteria of a word. It will not set up a "true" corrective, or *the* enlightened analysis: it will not draw any form of boundary to what we can meaningfully say with this word. And here, to hit such a person over the head with, say, Butler's *Gender Trouble* (in contrast to introducing him or her to Butler's work and ideas, to discuss it with him or her, inviting him or her to rethink sex, trying out new projections of this word in order to imagine things differently) is not going to bridge the separateness, it is not going to force this person into any kind of acknowledgement. Such intellectual authoritarianism may of course intimidate or silence the other and result thereby in a rhetorical success, such that your interlocutor admits incompetence and (on illegitimate grounds) accepts your superiority on the matter at hand. But such a false victory will not transform a question of *acknowledgment* into a question of *knowledge*; or a question of *sense* into a question of *truth*; or a matter of *grammatical authority* into a matter of *expert authority*; or a question of *moral or existential stance and vision* into a matter of *superior theoretical insight*.

[775] Especially different forms of *structural* analysis, be it Marxist, queer, feminist, psychological, or sociological etc., through which we can distinguish how a certain concept fits into a certain (ideological, conceptual, historical, etc.) *pattern* or tradition offer potent ways, I think, of creating these sorts of shifts in vision that hook up with our everyday lives. Once we see the pattern it will be hard to un-see it – which is, on the other hand, precisely part of the inherent risks of potent paranoia: seeing a pattern everywhere does not necessarily mean that we *should* see it everywhere, that it is always warranted to do so. Responding to this risk, as well as the risk of individual overinterpretations, is part of the difficulty of interpretation.

7.4. Paranoia's Skeptical Temptations: Fraudulence, Authoritarianism, and Dogmatism

At precisely this point one should see how appeals to big theories in literary interpretation, especially when fueled by painful difficulties of reality in this way, can create skeptical temptations for the literary interpreter. This temptation is similar to the temptation of fraudulence in art criticism I discussed in chapter 6. Or put differently, I would argue that *this* is what the problem of fraudulence looks like in the context of theory and intellectual discourse. The paranoid interpreter becomes fraudulent – and skeptical – if he or she is trying to appeal to theoretical expertise in order to settle a conflict with other native mature speakers on a matter concerning grammatical criteria. The situation is similar to the problem of fraudulence in modernism as discussed by Cavell. In these kinds of conflicts – say when we disagree whether the word "girl" can be meaningfully projected onto a XY-chromosome body – criteria are no longer stable. But neither is the "we" that we appeal to. Certain people are trying out and fighting for the legitimacy of new kinds of projections of our words, the acceptance of which may have crucial importance for their very existence and sense of identity. At the same time others reject these projections vehemently.

In these cases of conceptual change, appeals to "what we say when" will be of limited help since the real difficulty at work here – i.e. how we can project a word like "girl" meaningfully – is precisely what is up for grabs. Just as in modernism the old criteria will not reveal to us whether or not the new projection works and this will in turn divide people into insiders and outsiders, that is, those who can make sense of the projection of the word "girl" onto the XY-chromosome body and those who cannot.[776] Not everyone will agree with a certain (conservative) limitation as to how the word "girl" is to be used. That "old" notion of "girl" is not in accordance with *our* use, our grammar: we will not acknowledge that as what *we* say (or cannot say). Or, in this situation one may not yet be fully confident in what one would or will say. The difficulty of reality and the rift in community can make it hard to know what one means. I may have to struggle to wrap my words around an understanding for quite some time before I am ready to accept or reject a particular projection.[777]

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[776] Of course, criteria can *never* simply *tell* me which projections work, not even in the most noncontroversial cases: I will always have to know what to do with criteria, I will have to be the one assessing the projections myself. But the point is that in these cases of *dramatic change*, this is truer and more difficult than ever.

[777] I think Toril Moi makes a similar point in "'I Am a Woman': The Personal and the Philosophical" when she writes: "To say that the meaning of a word is its use is not, either, to imply that there is only one use of any given word. The very fact that there is continuous struggle over meaning (think of words such as *queer*, *woman*, *democracy*, *equality*, *freedom*) shows that different uses not only exist but sometimes give rise to violent conflicting meanings. If the meaning of a word is its use, such conflicts are part of the meaning of the word.

However, I cannot escape this predicament. I can of course try – and thus, in the process, become fraudulent – by relying on a theory as if the grammatical turmoil was already gone: as if the theory had finally drawn, or uncovered, the limits of sense. This means that in these kinds of conflicts there are also counterparts to the "avant-garde" and the "philistine" literary critics of modernism: the avant-garde theorist becomes fraudulent by claiming that he or she *knows* that the projection works (perhaps even "knows" that this analysis of the word constitutes the *true* but hidden, underlying meaning of the word) through his or her theory. But the philistine's theoretical response – that since the new projections obviously are at odds with how we usually talk (or used to talk), they are, *in fact*, failed projections – is equally fraudulent. However, neither can claim expert authority here – because each and every speaker must arrive at the sense of these projections on their own.[778]

To make my point clearer, let us say that a "conservative" person (not a philistine theorist, though) who also happens to be a literary critic reads a literary interpretation that draws upon Butler's theory. This interpretation claims to show how gender is construed in performative terms in this or that novel. Let us furthermore say that this reader cannot accept the interpretation – not because the reader is *uninterested* to do so, but because he or she is actually *unable*, because he or she cannot see how this interpretation could possibly make sense of the text. The reader cannot see how Butler's terminology succeeds in connecting with the words of the novel, since, for him or her, Butler's terminology has no authority or validity in capturing the meaning of *our* real-life discourse (outside the confines of Butler's own theory). The work does not mean what Butler means. In such a scenario, *avoiding* this reader, rejecting him or her as an interpretive peer until he or she *accepts* Butler's theory, can be a skeptical way of turning a *difficulty of interpretation* with roots in a difficulty of reality – through deflection –into a *difficulty of theory*. If you are tempted to deny to this reader their status as a possible interpretive equal, then you escape into theory.

Of course you may not actually *be* interpretive equals. If your reading presupposes some expert knowledge, say familiarity with Butler's work, and this reader lacks that familiarity, or clearly misunderstands Butler, this reader may simply not be authoritative to assess the validity of your claims. And,

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An appeal to ordinary usage, then, is not an appeal to dominant ideology or a passive submission to 'regulatory discourses', […]. On Cavell's understanding of the ordinary and the everyday, the ordinary is the arena where human struggle takes place. Murder and mayhem, revolution and resistance are as much part of the ordinary as successful communication and felicitous speech acts. The fact that we all experience misunderstandings or conflicts with distressing regularity surely makes that clear. Feminist analysis of sexism and the oppression of women is usually located within the sphere of the ordinary." Moi, "'I Am a Woman': The Personal and the Philosophical," pp. 210–211.

[778] As Cavell said with regard to suspicions of fraudulence in modernist art: "you cannot tell from outside; and the expense in getting inside is a matter for each man to go over." Cavell, Music Discomposed," p. 209.

most certainly, that is one thing: what he or she lacks is a kind of expert knowledge that your reading requires. But the skeptical escape to theory comes with the further presumption that the validity of the interpretation *ultimately* resides in the theory. It comes with the interpreter letting the theory carry the burden of the interpretive claim – the burden "of proof." But the theory cannot *ultimately* do that. If what lies at the heart of the interpretive claim is a difficulty of reality – a difficulty you may by all means articulate *via* a theory – you can nevertheless fail to shoulder your interpretive claim properly and you risk becoming authoritarian, doing so by going beyond your interpretive authority on a matter of grammatical criteria and falsely trying to turn such an issue into a matter of expertise. "The proof" of your interpretation is in the pudding – in the interpretation itself – in what *you*, through your reading can make sensible. Naturally the theory may be significant for the way you take on that responsibility, but at the end of the day, *you* make the interpretation.

This means that the difficulty of interpretation can be skeptically treated by paranoid readings through recourses to *dogmatism*. By making the theory *imperative* the paranoid reader can attempt to avoid the vulnerability that comes with interpretive claims and to try and avoid the fact that interpretations await and are in need of acknowledgment. The question of what certain words can mean and which projections are possible is then taken to be already settled by the theory, and placed beyond contest through dialogue with other readers. On such occasions the hermeneutic circle could be described either as *vicious* (the theory tells us in advance what we should see in the text and the text then necessarily confirms the theory in a fixed and closed loop) or simply as *broken* due to lack of reciprocity (the hierarchal order between theory and text turns the theory into an authoritarian edict). Either way the possibility that the text, or other readers, could challenge the theory is foreclosed beforehand.[779]

[779] The dangers of theoretical dogmatism, in both literary and cultural studies, are pointed out in an excellent way by Ellen Rooney in her article "Form and Contentment" (2000). Both my analysis and response to the problem resemble hers, though she does not think of this problem in terms of skepticism. As a "new formalist" she claims that a return, or reinvestigation of, the insights from the formalist tradition can help to counter theoretical dogmatism in literary and cultural criticism. Discussing theoretically motivated thematical readings, Rooney returns to the arguments of "The Heresy of Paraphrase" and writes: "Formalism is a matter not of barring thematizations but of refusing to reduce reading entirely to the elucidation, essentially the paraphrase, of themes – theoretical, ideological, or humanistic. The various modes of thematization that currently dominate critical readings of both the literary and the extra-literary kind are no longer simply inescapable; they are the only game in town. When a text-to-be read (whatever its genre) is engaged only to confirm the prior insights of a theoretical problematic, reading is reduced to reiteration and becomes literally beside the point. […] In this sense, theory is dead in the peculiar way that Stanley Fish once remarked also applied to deconstruction: it is everywhere. […] Speaking from the perspective of critical (literary and cultural) *theory* for the moment, the work of formalism is to resist the application of 'theoretical themes' as master codes that reduce every text (whatever its provenance) to an illustration of theory itself. But if this notion of resistance is to avoid merely reinstating an account of the

This is in turn a kind of *authoritarianism*. The paranoid reader can become skeptical through authoritarian appeals to theory by trying to turn questions predicated on grammatical criteria and morality into questions of knowledge and truth; i.e. questions of what we *can* (logically) mean and how we *should* see a certain phenomenon are treated as questions of the *correct/enlightened/true* way to mean and look at something – which is something which a given theory will provide from the outset. I think Sedgwick is touching upon this skeptical possibility in dogmatic paranoia when she contests Fredric Jameson's imperative: "Always historicize!" Her response is: "*Always* historicize? What could have less to do with historicizing than the commanding, atemporal adverb 'always'?"[780] The dogmatic paranoid reader can thus become an interpretive skeptic in an analogous way to the interpretive epistemologist of Beardsley's variety: by becoming a skeptical twin. In making an imperative out of a theoretical outlook, the dogmatic paranoid reader disqualifies the grammatical authority of his or her fellow interpreters: their possible alternative interpretations are principally overridden by the chosen hermeneutical master-code.

Skeptical appeals to big theories are of course not necessarily related to difficulties of reality.[781] However, I believe that dogmatic appeals to big theories are particularly tempting when a moral or existential issue – especially when it is difficult both to articulate and share – lies at the heart of the interpretive effort. When it becomes immensely important that others acknowledge that they also *take things so*, and when seeing *this* as *that* has significant existential or moral bearing. Literary interpretations indeed have the potential of creating such changes of vision and to bridge separateness (just as literature, conversations and other interactions have the capacity to do, and thus this is no way unique to literary interpretation). However, if it is my interpretive aim to embody and invite other readers to share such a vision, I am not shouldering my task adequately if I treat the theory as having already done the job *for* me. The interpretation, *as* an interpretation, can present an *invitation* to such a shared vision but it cannot create an interpretive "we" by intellectual force or theoretical bullying. Like many other important forms of human interaction and intimacies, interpretation requires acknowledgment, or *consent*, for its validation.

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text as an occult object dictating its own reading, we are bound to renegotiate the relations among theory, reading, and form from the ground up." Ellen Rooney, "Form and Contentment," pp. 29–31.

[780] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 125.

[781] In this chapter I have focused on the skeptical appeals to big theories in interpretation that are skeptical by virtue of their rejection and denial of others' grammatical authority on matters that ultimately concern moral/existential issues and grammatical criteria. I try to bring out how theoretically guided interpretations can become authoritarian by trying to turn a question of existentially relevant sense-making into a matter of professional expertise. Not all dogmatic appeals to big theories are however of this sort, i.e. not all are rooted in and try to settle a difficulty of reality in this skeptical way. I assume, for instance, that Jameson's is not.

It is along these lines I understand Elizabeth Costello's speech. In response to the predicament of living in a wounding society in which she will be seen as paranoid by many – as someone making a mountain out of a molehill – she nevertheless seeks acknowledgment. Costello does not intellectualize. She does not (want to) become authoritarian. She realizes that she must let her peers pass their own judgment. And she knows that she cannot appeal to any kind of expertise without becoming fraudulent. She does not speak to convey information. Instead she stands up and confesses her own woundedness and vulnerability, hoping that her claim to shared intelligibility and her invitation to moral vision will be answered, facing the risk that it will not. (And, indeed, it was not.) This is one possible non-fraudulent, non-skeptical, non-authoritarian way to face the suspicion of paranoia and the predicament of separateness.

7.5. Interpretive Separateness: Separatism and the Hopeful Invitation of Close Reading

Another way to deal with the difficulties of *separateness* – a way that I think should not solely be described as a *temptation*, but perhaps also as an occasionally necessary strategy of interpretive survival – is *separatism*. It is to settle, at least for the moment, with the separateness you encounter and say: this gap I cannot cross. I refuse to try beyond a certain point, because I cannot see how it would not be a compromise and a compromise I am not willing to make. To speak with this person, say, who cannot acknowledge certain central starting points (moral, existential, conceptual, etc.) can be like trying to speak to someone who only responds with abusive violence. Lack of acknowledgment may, of course, be mutual, and sometimes for good reasons. Once more, I want to turn to Costello for an articulation of the problem at hand. In the following quote she describes this kind of inability to continue a conversation in terms of unwillingness to break bread:

> 'To me, a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether you have a white or a black skin, and a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether or not you know the difference between a subject and a predicate, are more like than they are unlike. Usually I am wary of exclusionary gestures. I know of one prominent philosopher who states that he is simply not prepared to philosophize about animals with people who eat meat. I am not sure I would go as far as that – frankly, I have not the courage – but I must say I would not fall over myself to meet the gentleman whose books I just have been citing. Specifically, I would not fall over myself to break bread with him. Would I be prepared to discuss ideas with him? That really is the

> crucial question. Discussion is possible only when there is a common ground.[782]

The willingness to continue discussion is of course a condition for academic literary interpretation and debate. However, you may accept the fact that certain separateness might be unbridgeable and therefore you continue to preach to the already converted. I am not here thinking of such forms of academic "separatism" which can be seen in how people with similar intellectual convictions and interests read and publish in the same academic journals; neither for that matter in how we often only attend seminars and conferences that to some extent align with our pre-given interests, nor how we only care to participate in interpretive discussions we do not find ourselves disoriented by from the start. All these things are well-known academic facts. Rather I am talking about the sense of *having* no common ground on a certain issue, so discussion *is* (or at least seems) impossible (not just boring or difficult). "But then one is never sure what is possible until it happens; and when it happens it may produce a sense of revolution, of the past escaped and our problems solved."[783] Therefore just because attempts have failed so far, it does not mean that the next one will do so too. The only way to *really* know whether a common ground was possible is when it is already established and we continue the conversation.

In any case, these different forms of difficulties of reality may deeply inform interpretive stances in the interpretation of literature. They may or may not do so via the articulation of theory. And a theory may be what we feel best captures such a difficulty, so we can give that difficulty a voice. Big theories *can* be fundamental for our entire outlook as well as for establishing the determinate position from which we start our interpretive work. I am not saying that we should not occasionally accept this and its consequence, namely that my interpretation may only make sense to someone who already shares (at least to a certain degree) my theoretical (or existential, moral, political) ground. But accepting this fact means that my *common* authority may be restricted; the interpretive ground I share with others is perhaps smaller than I would otherwise hope. If that is the case then I need to acknowledge that my shared authority is herewith limited, not automatically superior. And this can be a perfectly valid way to accept my interpretive authority – without becoming authoritarian. It can be a way to acknowledge how my separateness (the one I share with a certain group) will bring a certain, perhaps unwanted, separatism along with it.

However, and this accounts for the affirmative stress I place on the New Critical practice of close reading, just as I think Sedgwick is right in warning us not to *overestimate* the power of theory, we should not *underestimate* the

[782] Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, pp. 111–112.
[783] Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," p. 73.

power of our own interpretations either and the possible common grounds we can establish through them. Even if a certain theory is that which opens up a particular interpretive possibility for me, depending upon how heavily (or dogmatically) I rely on its accuracy, my interpretation may still stand or fall by itself. Indeed, it might be my interpretation that makes a certain problem or theoretical perspective intelligible for others. In light of this, consider the following words of Sedgwick:

> But the history of literary criticism can also be viewed as a repertoire of alternative models for allowing strong and weak theory to interdigitate. What could better represent "weak theory, little better than a description of the phenomena which it purports to explain," than the devalued and near obsolescent New Critical skill of imaginative close reading?[784]

Returning to the rough ground does not mean condemning theory. Theory and close reading can inform one another. A big theory may allow you to see a phenomenon in a new way – a way that revitalizes your relation to the art and the world – a way that makes you sensitive to aspects of the text you did not sense before. But it can equally well be the other way around – that a close reading comes to display, say, structures of sexism, or racism, or transphobia, which in turn can lend a big theory substance: that it can enable a reader to see how the theory's seemingly abstract concerns hook up with reality.[785] Even in cases where the reader may not accept all parts of the theory. In short, theory need not constitute itself as a *foundation* in order to enable communication. In "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," Gadamer writes:

> [W]hat I would have in the place of "foundation" […] I would call […] "participation," because that is what happens in human life. That is, without any doubt, the excellence of the humanities, that we share a common world of tradition and interpreted human experience. The interpretation of the common world in which we participate is certainly not in the first place the objectifying task of methodological thinking. That may certainly be included, but it is not the raison d'être of our activity. […] Participation is a strange word. Its dialectic consists of the fact that participation is both taking parts, but in a way taking the whole. Everybody who participates in something does not take something away, so that others cannot have it. The opposite is true: by

[784] Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 145.

[785] This balance and dialectics between literary work, world and theory is continuously stressed, though of course not uniquely so, by the New Formalists critics. In Bogel's words, in this context also citing Michael P. Clark, the "effort [is] to avoid sacrificing the work to the world, or the reverse – an effort to value and respect what Clark terms 'the unique vision literature affords for readers able to tell the difference between the work and the world, and able to read *what the work tells us* about the world in that difference.'" Bogel, *New Formalist Criticism*, p. 185. Bogel's italics. See also Michael P. Clark, "Introduction," *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. Michael P. Clark (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 13.

> sharing, by our participating in the things in which we are participating, we enrich them; they do not become smaller, but larger.[786]

I read Gadamer as here saying something like this: just because theories cannot provide us with ultimate foundations it does not mean that we do not have a common ground of interpretation. And if that common ground at times seems to lose, or actually loses, its stability and scope, the only way to bring it back is through conversation. *That* is our ground – that *and*, in literary interpretation, *the text itself*. This also gives us a reason for "defending the process of criticism," as Cavell writes "so far as criticism is thought of, as I think of it, as a natural extension of conversation."[787] If conversation seems pointless since we do not share a common ground, this is more fittingly described as an expression of hopelessness than as an accurate estimation of the *possibility* of communication. As long as we speak the same language there is *always* the possibility (though it may not always, perhaps even seldom, flower into actuality) of establishing a mutually intelligible and bearable common ground. Separatism may be a temporary strategy of survival but we should not think we are condemned to it when facing incomprehension – we cannot know in advance where the limits of understanding run or, in fact, will run. On that note, I would like to say with Gadamer that "exactly because we give up a special idea of foundation in principle, we become better phenomenologists, closer to the real givenness, and we are more aware of the reciprocity between our conceptual efforts and the concrete in life experience."[788]

7.6. Concluding remarks

So are we back on the rough ground of interpretation; a place of *friction*, by no means in every way ideal, but where our interpretive problems and solutions are at home? In this book I have tried to characterize interpretive skepticism by presenting a taxonomy and general structure of how we may be tempted to try and avoid the vulnerability of our interpretive claims. My hope is that this analysis can help us detect hidden forms of skepticism as it lurks in and around literary theory as well as to avoid the temptation of skepticism in our own work. Through an investigation of the New Critical texts of Monroe C. Beardsley and Cleanth Brooks, I have sought to give more substance to this characterization by explaining how Beardsley's attempt to state the criteria and nature of interpretive validity *in advance* (before the

[786] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, eds. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p. 64.
[787] Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 7.
[788] Gadamer, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," p. 65.

fearful act of reading) turns him into a skeptical twin about interpretation, and how his categorical rejection of authorial intentions turns him into a literary skeptic about other minds. I have also attempted to show how Brooks becomes an interpretive skeptic and a skeptical twin about poetry in his partially failed attempt to protect poetry against skeptical onslaught. Nonetheless, I have also argued that *close reading* (in a wider sense) proposes a way of reading that resembles Cavell's philosophical injunction that we should *look and see*, and that it can offer us *one* way (but not *the* way) to remain on the rough ground of interpretation. Finally, in this last chapter, I have hopefully shown that not only theories of literary meaning, interpretive validity, and criteria can lead to interpretive skepticism – *dogmatic, authoritarian, and fraudulent* appeals to big (suspicious) theories in literary interpretation can as well. But this does not imply that all paranoid or theoretical readings are skeptical – on the contrary – such interpretations can also lead us back from isolation to the rough, common, ground of literary interpretation.

Of course there is, in all this, a remaining irony in me invoking Sedgwick in the final chapter of this book. The thought has not escaped me that my own project could also face the critique of relying too heavily on the method of *exposure*. If what I have done is to try and expose hidden skepticism in interpretive theory, does it follow that I think once we know how some appeals to theory may become skeptical then skeptical theories will disappear or lose their attractiveness to us? And furthermore, my investigation relies on, and heavily draws upon, an understanding of Cavell's philosophical analysis of skepticism. So how is this project, one could ask, different from those appeals to theory in literary interpretation I claim to run the risk of becoming authoritarian?

Well, I agree that I do place a certain faith in exposure as a means to resist the skeptical temptation in literary theory, and I admit that for those who will not accept my Cavellian analysis of skepticism, my effort will have little bearing. My authority will then be limited. This book is a succession of claims to community and invitations to shared intelligibility. As such it awaits, and is vulnerable to, acknowledgment. As for final words, I would like to quote Cavell, and end on a note where theory and practice are given the chance to acknowledge one another: "I should like to stress that the way to overcome theory correctly, philosophically, is to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it. I would not object to calling this a piece of theoretical advice, as long as it is also called a piece of practical advice."[789]

[789] Cavell, "Introduction: Words for a Conversation," p. 10.

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