

## Passionate Speech in Dark Woods of a Life

Here are lines from the Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai: I give him first and last word.

*How do the visions of the prophets see me?*  
*The burning bush sees me as a man extinguished but alive.*  
*And what does Ezekiel's vision of the chariot say about me?*  
*Look, down there is a man who has no wings,*  
*Nor the face of a lion, an ox, or an eagle,*  
*And he can walk in only one direction at a time.*  
*He has no radiance about him, no brightness the color of amber,*  
*just darkness within. That is his soul.*  
*But if we ever fall from our heights and crash to the ground,*  
*He will pick up the scattered pieces,*  
*And all his life, he will keep trying to put us together again,*  
*to restore us, to raise us back up to the skies.<sup>1</sup>*



I won't ask whether these lines are sacred or secular, songs or like prayers. It hardly matters, at this point, at least to me, for they speak – irrevocably -- *bitter sweet*. And they can be left ringing in whatever register they own.

Here's a provocative, impassioned warning:

CAUTION: The appalling and needless loss of life on this mountain has been due largely to the failure of robust trampers to realize that wintry storms of incredible violence occur at times even during the summer months. Rocks become ice-coated, freezing fog blinds and suffocates, winds of hurricane force exhaust the tramper, and when he stops to rest, a temperature below freezing completes the tragedy. If you are experiencing difficulty, abandon your climb! The highest wind velocities ever recorded were attained on Mt.

Washington. Since the worst is yet to come, *turn back without shame, before it's too late.*<sup>2</sup>

That's an example of what Stanley Cavell calls passionate speech. What makes it passionate is the way it gets under my skin; it invades my psyche in the area of my shames and prides and fears. Cavell would say it "improvises in the disorder of my desires." Should I go on up the trail, not yet icy -- or turn back? That might seem like a straightforward practical question, yet this CAUTION, in its passion, could bring us into Dante's dark woods, a place where the troubled soul is exposed.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The soul?*

A pedagogy driven by care for the soul would move in different terrain than one driven by care for the self and its executive initiatives, its critical and rational drives, its will to take charge of life and master its obstructions — and *'just do it.'* Care for the self keeps us in familiar secular domains. Care for the soul leads us into the unmasterable, the irresolvable or intractable, the realms of conflicting shadows rather than steady light. David Rothenberg captures the risk of listening to the soul. "There is something dangerous about the grooves that capture the soul. They pull us in and there is no escape."<sup>4</sup>

Why should the trailhead warning strike me as more than an innocuous traffic sign: "Bump ahead!" No doubt it's about my aspiration to enter the wild and grapple with shadowy, exciting, and dangerous challenges. Aren't life and death themselves such a dangerous symphony of thrills, falls, threats, and vast vistas? And perhaps this CAUTION is a reminder of my finitude, that the majestic and sublime can be

supremely indifferent to my well-being, despite the self's will-to-mastery. Can a sharp reminder of finitude, the final failure of mastery, call me to a piety I've abandoned? If so, the reminder is addressed to the soul in an idiom not solely secular that the executive self cannot read.

### I. Bringing the Sacred Alive

I inhabit a typical secular university. Despite my invocation of the sacred, I doubt I'll be called before academic inquisitors. If I were, the charge would be that I had crossed the line, violated a taboo, not just in recklessly revealing *my* soul as I wandered the domains of piety. The critical indiscretion would be my trespass on private property, my taking executive privilege away from selves in my charge. I'm asking them to release that privilege for a moment.

In this appeal to regions of a soul, I am disrespecting the sanctity of a secular calling: these young selves seek simple knowledge, or skills in critique -- not transformation of soul. I hoodwink those over whom I hold inordinate power by touching on gods, prophecy, piety, not just in an abstract theoretical way, but by letting reverence and prophecy touch down in the class, a reality my voice and text may well bring into being. That makes my classroom redolent of pious souls, not executive secular selves. It intrudes illegitimately on the privacy of innocent listeners – *this* one, in the second row.

Short of inquisition, if I were asked collegially what piety and soul were doing in a secular classroom, I could ask in return why we should stick with the old-style valorization of the secular that finds repulsive any evocation of piety? After all, I did not hold a church service but revealed piety half-concealed in an otherwise fully secular trailhead CAUTION. I could ask, second, why in this age of dark woods, horrors, and proliferations of loss, questioning the limits of the executive self, or opening persons toward suffering or receptive piety, violates the aims of the humanities?

Literature, philosophy, art, religion, and music are portals to all things human. Conventional wisdom has it that piety is an alien presence in the humanities classroom, but I don't find it so. There's truth in the

reticence, patience, and listening of piety. It's a welcome relief from relentless self-assertive critique. In teaching, I move quite naturally from a mountain CAUTION or a poem of Emily Dickinson to non-sectarian but nevertheless reverent, contemplative activities (reading, writing, speaking, thinking quietly), focused on texts that are often tilted toward the religious.<sup>5</sup> Taking a step further, we might find the power of this warning overtake the reign of executive, autonomous decisions, widening a sense of the human. Perhaps we'd awaken full in the midst of wild prophecy and injunction: "*The Worst is Yet To Come! Turn Back without Shame!*" -- as if Dante's ghosts cross our path, whispering dire admonition: *Abandon hubris, Apocalypse at hand.*

## II. Cavell's 'Passionate Speech'

A prolific man of letters and gripping philosopher, Stanley Cavell takes "passionate utterance" to be a key to speech where, in my words, the soul is at stake. Passionate utterances are "invitations to improvisation in the disorder of desire."<sup>6</sup> In his discussion of this range of human conversation, or call and response, or utterance and acknowledgment, he doesn't cite a CAUTION posted at trailheads in White Mountains National Forest. That's my piece of "found art," a set of words to set us improvising on mortality and *hubris*, shame and self-assertion, piety and impiety, nature's powers to humble. Cavell gives us his own examples of passionate speech. Beyond that he advances a sort of pious critique that involves what he will call -- in terms that move well beyond the narrowly secular -- "redemptive writing" and "redemptive reading."<sup>7</sup>

It's as if Cavell proposes that souls could be saved in the reading and writing of philosophy and literature. This piety is evinced well outside a divinity school or seminary. Cavell writes from the heart of a prestigious Ivy League university. Looking back on his long career, we can find traces from its beginning of a concern for what becomes "passionate speech," for the plight of a soul in dark woods. Here is the poet-playwright Jean Giraudoux in words that Cavell uses as the epigraph for his signal 1962 *Philosophical Review* article called "The Availability of the Philosophy of the Later Wittgenstein":

Epochs are in accord with themselves only if the crowd comes into these radiant confessionals which are the theaters or the arenas, and as much as possible, . . . to listen to its own confessions of cowardice and sacrifice, of hate and passion . . . For there is no theatre which is not prophecy. Not this false divination which gives names and dates, but true prophecy, that which reveals to men these surprising truths: that the living must live, that the living must die, that autumn must follow summer, spring follow winter, that there are four elements, that there is happiness, that there are innumerable miseries, that life is a reality, that it is a dream, that man lives in peace, that man lives on blood; in short, those things they will never know. <sup>8</sup>

It isn't clear what philosophers devoted to rational analysis should make of these instances of passionate speech. The White Mountains sign might be reduced to a warning or prohibition, burdened with an excess of sentimental rhetoric. The words from Giraudoux might seem maddeningly poetic or sermoniac or hysterical – certainly *not* level-headed philosophy. Cavell published these in the most insistently level-headed and rhetoric-averse of philosophical journals. I must say that to me reading those lines in the 60s was a breath of fresh air. Others no doubt found that epigraph reckless or just foolishly off base.

Philosophers in the mainstream have fixated on rational speech and the life of reason to the neglect of passionate speech and the life of the passions. <sup>9</sup> We have classes in how to think critically but few in how to feel attentively, classes in rational decision theory but none in responsible passions or in sensitive attention to others. <sup>10</sup> Seeing better and feeling with more subtlety are part of metamorphosis of spirit and redemption of soul -- a good thing, yes?

*Of course, the worst of passions and imaginings can be -- must be -- deflated by rational critique. But defeating the worst is not attaining the best. Nor is defeating the worst making the better or the best either*

*intelligible, or alluring.* And don't we desperately need writing that makes the best, not necessarily fully justified, but at least intelligible and alluring?

We seek clues to the salvation of a soul, or clues to a way out through dark woods (whether that's imagined in secular or religious terms). Such clues typically emerge elsewhere than in rational critique. The great novels of Henry James or George Eliot show that sensitive *conversational and emotional exchange* can quite naturally effect change in person and desire.<sup>11</sup> We arrive, at least imaginatively, through contemplation of poetry or novels or other art forms, at a more tempered or modulated, a less imprisoning or explosive, set of passions.<sup>12</sup> Even in a so-called secular classroom we easily encounter redemptive writing. Here is George Eliot, redeeming us not from sin but from a certain blindness.

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.<sup>13</sup>

She raises unanswerable but quixotically gripping questions, questions with *multiple, equally plausible-implausible, answers*.<sup>14</sup> Is it tragic that our rhythms, our periods of inhalation and exhalation, are poorly adjusted to the rhythms of the seas, seasons, or stars, that our breathing is manic relative to the breathing of oaks or slow-moving clouds? Is it tragic that the stride of our walks is outmatched by the timeless immeasurable stride of mountains? Should our frequency be more akin to the heartbeat of humming birds? How fast, or slow is our dance? Her words bring us to think on *first and last things*, the traditionally hallowed ground of the sacred. They remind us that dull vision and numbness toward ordinary human life keeps us in hellish woods. Salvation is better seeing, imagining, and feeling. With a revelation of "quite ordinary"

reality, we'd die on the spot from the sublime roar. Eliot can remind us that ethics can not only tell us how to restrain the bad but, as importantly, what might release the good – as imaginative vision might.

### III. Ubiquity and Necessity of Passionate Speech

Cavell focuses on “passionate utterance” in an effort to legitimate a neglected range of speech neither purely descriptive and fodder for argument -- nor the ceremonial or quasi-legal domain of performative utterance. To say, “freezing fog blinds and suffocates” might be construed as simply fact-stating. But at a trailhead it's a screaming CAUTION, informative but also pleading and warning, urgently uttered from the heart, meant to impact *my* heart. It's meant to burn into the ‘tramper’s’ soul, instill imaginative empathy with another tramper, one caught in mortal tragedy, improvise pleadingly in the disorder of desires.<sup>15</sup> It does not alter the social world, say as a promise does. I can read the trailhead warning in relative solitude, letting it sink in, or dismissing it, none-the-worse for mulling it quietly. It has none of the force of a ranger’s shout at close quarters: “Evacuate!” If I head back rather than continue, it's due to its elegant suggestive improvisation, not due to overt threat or coercion.

Similarly, Giraudoux invites me to consider that I do and don't know – my desires are surely disordered, and distort my knowledge. I know and don't *want* to know that I'm cowardly, or will die, or that there is misery, or that man lives on blood. Passionate utterance invokes the shifting shapes of passion and desire, of imagination and sensibility, prompting the mobile responsiveness Kierkegaard calls our subjectivity. Arcing words in passionate utterance lift us – or they leave us indifferent. They live or die as we receive or refuse them, as we hear their redemptive register or not, find them saving or banal.

*“No man is an Island . . . ”*

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident . . . ”*

*“the readiness is all . . . ”*

*“Let it be!”*

*“Ain’t I a woman?”*

*“the unexamined life is not . . . ”*

*“I have a dream . . . ”*

The power of these words (from Hamlet, Sojourner Truth, or elsewhere) is analogous to the power of aesthetic judgments. I hear Hamlet’s “Let it be!” or Donne’s “No man is an Island” and am moved to utter iterations, with critical and furthering comment, carrying it forward in my own voice. These words (and mine) spread exponentially, broadening their echo spatially and temporally over an ever-widening community.<sup>16</sup> They are *proposed, invitational, intimate universals*.

#### IV. Recovering the First Person

To engage passionate speech means embracing the first person as an indispensable source of voice and locus of experiential meanings to which one can witness. Finding our way in and out of dark woods is tracing the passionate leads of others. It is self-involving, self-implicating, self-exposing in the way brush strokes of autobiography are self-exposing. Every discipline and field in the humanities is affected by battle lines drawn between the secular cool analytic and the existential, experiential, or quasi-religious, where the extremes of terror and bliss reside, and where less dramatic passions and feelings reside. Every discipline and field is affected by battle lines drawn between philosophies that are devoted only to abstract analysis, bent on weeding the first personal out, and those open to the quality or meaning of life and first personal explorations of it. These battle lines around styles of inquiry and philosophy, pivoting on the appropriateness of attention to, and use of, the first personal, prevent easy movement between attention to the human at all levels of focus, easy movement, for example, between institutional and social-scientific analysis (where the first person is alien) and the heart of piety, generous critique, literature, and religious sensibility.<sup>17</sup>

More pointedly, if the standoffs of Atheist-Protestant-Catholic, Christian-Muslim, secular-religious, capitalist-socialist describe unedifying and intractable polarities, better try to change the terms of debate

than continue bickering, blindness, and warfare. One way to do this is to improvise new ways to think (in the academy and outside it) of matters of self and soul, of redemption and dark woods. We'd discover a place and vernacular neither old-style secular nor old-style religious.

We attend to writers who ache for redemption or strengthening of soul against inroads of cynicism, despair, or depersonalization. The trailhead sign is a portal probing intersections of life and death, sadness and joy, a gentle and wild nature, all with an eye toward retaining a soul's aspirations despite threatening storms, and toward seeing humility as redemptive. George Eliot, Giraudoux, and others we've yet to consider, provide more complex instances of passionate speech, of redemption (or its absence) and of dark woods (or of light in its clearings). These examples are life-lines; they will either hold, or not, we grab them or not. No all-conquering dispassionate argument will come to the rescue.

#### V. Trauma and Writing for Redemption

Cavell's recent autobiography, *Little did I Know*, illustrates what we can call redemptive reading and writing.<sup>18</sup> The need appears in his recounting of a moment of terror in his early youth when his father growled and lurched menacingly. I omit the details, but say only that those unloving gestures and words crashed like a fist in a room not yet anyone's own, not anyone's home, not Stanley's, not his father's, not his mother's. They had abruptly vacated the only home the seven year old had known. That unloving outburst thundered as a refusal to let life have promise, or struck like a refusal of the promise of life.

The father promises that the son will never know a moment of communion, thus the man enacts an excommunication. Our reading of this scene, I'll hazard, will be both secular and religious. The idea of life as a promise, and of communion with our fathers, certainly has religious resonances, however quickly we may also take primal familial battles in straightforwardly psychoanalytic terms.

William Day suggests that this scenario from Cavell's autobiography delivers a religiously modulated assault on a child, a perversely more-than-secular disownment.<sup>19</sup> He suggests also that the scenario might

trigger redemptive readings of our own pasts, philosophy opening toward metamorphosis. We let Cavell's account read us, revealing ourselves to ourselves. This is education of the spirit.

We are revealed to ourselves through responding to invitations to improvisation in the disorder of our *own* desires. This brings us to the natural affinity of passionate speech to poetry, literature, and autobiography, and the affinity of these to philosophy of an autobiographical cast. *Little Did I Know* is an instance of what Cavell calls philosophy and autobiography being told in terms of each other -- as if his sort of philosophy must attend to the mobile self of the teller.<sup>20</sup> His autobiography would clarify the conditions of his life, evoke what is promised and refused in it, and what redemptions, advances, culminations or failures are contained in that life, as he undergoes it experientially, and furthers it, taking this path or that (or neither or both). He negotiates dark woods, mottled paths, bright spots of light.

If philosophy links to autobiography, it will not be just a series of lawyer-like arguments, or analyses of social contracts, for instance. The inherited exemplars for this sort of philosophical writing would straddle literature and autobiography. We'd think of Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Thoreau's *Walden* or *A Week on the Concord*, Kierkegaard's *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*, Montaigne's *Essays*. Despite poetry's being older, and a progenitor, philosophy needn't have a chip on her shoulder, always starting quarrels with the passions, and those passions allied with ancestral songs -- Homer, for instance, or more recently with old songs sung by Toni Morrison. Philosophy needs passion and song, for it is, after all, a love story. Love of wisdom means attention to the fine texture of lives, and love of a form of life suited to oneself, in the light of the good, love of a life one can affirm.

## VI. Darkness

In speaking of "the dark woods of a life" I'm thinking of Dante, who at the beginning of the *Comedy* confesses that he finds himself mid-life in the middle of a dark wood. I'm thinking also of Heidegger's "clearing" in dark woods, where things shine in intelligibility.<sup>21</sup> And I'm thinking of human bodies seeking

their own intelligibility. In a clearing in woods reeking of slavery, Toni Morrison has Baby Suggs plea to her disjoint congregation, “*love your bodies.*”<sup>22</sup> And I’m thinking of Thoreau who loses his body in the dark clouds of Kataadn,<sup>23</sup>

In his neglected first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*, beneath the bright river travel, Thoreau memorializes the violent and protracted death of his brother John. The brothers row upriver towards the river’s source high in the White Mountains. On the return downriver, Henry tells us of Hannah Dustan who in 1697 scalped her sleeping captors and their children to return by night by the Merrimack to her home near Haverhill. She had been captured and made to witness her nursing infant dashed dead against a tree. Dark woods indeed! And only partially intelligible bodies.

Years later, Thoreau encounters a different darkness atop Mt. Kttadn. Well above tree-line lost in swirling fogs, boulders thrown randomly about, Chaos, and indifferent gods attack. His spirit is sucked from between his ribs. In panic and desperation, he flies down out of that no-man’s land, crying “*Contact, Contact! Give me Contact! The common sense!*”<sup>24</sup> Thoreau’s plea for “contact”, and “the common sense” is a plea for bodily footholds and orientation, things lost in the chaos of the bouldered peak. Fleeing the wind- swept crest is a primal image of Thoreau’s yearning for orientation and respite.

The text has me shudder as Thoreau does, and has me imagine the gift of respite, a moment of sweet contact. To be read by the text is to have my capacity for shuddering and hope calibrated behind my back, outside will or decision, outside the purview of the executive self. Philosophy in its moment of shudder at chaos becomes skepticism, and then in its moments of contact, skepticism is answered, in the sense of being set aside. Not argument but love of the world, renewal of contact, and the *sensus communis* give skepticism the slip. The “ordinary” returns in new light.<sup>25</sup> Undergoing the world’s delights, Thoreau can’t postpone bespeaking them. There are many moments of joyful contact in Thoreau, but let me rescue one not from him but from Rousseau. In *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Rousseau gives us philosophy and autobiography told “in terms of each other” and in one instance we get unrivalled delight. Rousseau is reborn.<sup>26</sup>

Ambling on a narrow village lane, a carriage approaches from behind, speeding recklessly. It's escorted in front by a huge Great Dane, announcing Royalty's right to get by. It swiftly bears down on him. Jump right ? . . . left? He is knocked down. Then sometime later he awakens:

Night was beginning to fall. I perceived the sky, some stars, and green leaves. This first sensation was a delicious moment. I was conscious of myself only through this. I was being born into life in that instant, and it seemed to me as if all I perceived was filled with my frail existence. Entirely absorbed in the present moment, I remembered nothing, I had no distinct notion of my individuality, nor the slightest idea of what had just happened to me; I didn't know who I was or where I was; I felt no pain, or fear, or uneasiness. I watched my blood flow just as I would have watched a brook, without imagining that this blood belonged in any way to me. I felt throughout my whole being a ravishing calm, and every time I remember it I can find nothing comparable in all the activity of familiar pleasures.<sup>27</sup>

Rousseau invites us to take in an epiphany, momentary yet lasting, overflowing in pleasure and significance, a sublime moment of "ravishing calm." Moments like these ought to mitigate suffering, as in a touch of love, or a touch of the divine.

Can there be a "ravishing calm" after childbirth? Rousseau gives us an image of natality, of birth. Is that how mothers would take in that scene? Would the marvelous British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch describe in these terms her emergence half naked from a favorite swimming hole?<sup>28</sup> My wheelchair student plays soccer; does he feel a ravishing calm as he spins on a dime, punching a goal? Gillian Rose, cut short before fifty by cancer, writes of her doctors' attention/inattention and writes with astounding philosophical precision of her body and colostomy.<sup>29</sup> There are bodies and bodies, to be hurt and enjoyed,

redeemed and lost, marked this way and that, dark and undark, in pleasure and pain.<sup>30</sup> Rousseau doesn't tell us outright that this epiphany is salvation, but he does say it's rebirth. As Thoreau flees the stark mountaintop for contact and orientation, he'd also relish the intense satisfaction Rousseau reports, a seamless connection and contact with things.

Rousseau's perceptions do not give him things alien but extensions of himself, his "frail being" having flowed outward into the world, which then flows back, we suppose. But perhaps directionality is illusory here, the outward flow perfectly balanced by the inward, delivering serenity in a restful, timeless, plenum: *worldselfworld*. The blood he perceives is not his own (certainly not his *possession*), yet it is not alien, either. The allure of all is supreme. This is seamless undifferentiated communion, self-loss in a primordial amiable plenum, no gaps between perceiver, perception and perceived. Is this a secular experience or a religious one? Surely both. Elsewhere Thoreau lets himself flow across the pond's snow covered ice curving with the path of a fox.<sup>31</sup> And we have a report from Cavell's *Pitch of Philosophy* of his mother finding seamless connection and contact as she lets her frail being flow into the notes her piano and score provide.<sup>32</sup> His mother's uncanny sight-reading is a wonderfully expressive attunement to the world. Her voice, her perfect musical intimacy as her fingers delivered Brahms or Schubert, left no room for interpretative gaps. We have seamless, ecstatic connection between text, reader (listener), and music (sound).

This is a moment when interpretation does not "go all the way down," where there is precisely no space between notes read and their utterance. And with no space for interpretation, there is room only for love of the notes, love of the world, suspension of doubts -- a moment when the affliction of migraine, for example, might recede. It is the still time of ongoing revelation. Here a taste of brie, or wince at sudden light, is primary. Not all meaning is textual, or contextual; some is such stuff as texts are made of.

A "theology of reading" or a knack for "redemptive reading" will cherish moments of seamless connection that manifest the mind of racing notes, or moments that have a mutual perceptual-responsive flow (Thoreau sees a scampering fox and scampers), or moments like Rousseau's where "the sky, some

stars, and green leaves” deliver a “ravishing calm.” A theology of reading will find the sacred in the so-called secular. With Rousseau, a knack for redemptive reading will find redemption in moments of the highest imaginable communion. Ishmael talks long into the night in bed with the tattooed Queequeg -- communion if ever there was.<sup>33</sup> The woods reeking of slavery, Baby Suggs says to all in this refuge, “*love your bodies.*”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps that’s a promise of redemption.

Yet redemption – need we say -- can be elusive, no matter how great the need. Cavell remembers thwarted communion. His father wished he did not exist. What readings of that excommunication could possibly heal? A reading that removed the burdens of curse by forgiving the father? One that parried the curse by attention to the memory of unimpeded musical flow, the memory of a mother who finds in the unfolding of notes a way for her heart and imagination to be more free, say freer from the migraine that beset her? One that sought intelligibility (not justification), of the sort philosophy has almost always promised? <sup>35</sup> Perhaps it will take Cavell the telling of an entire life to find how that curse might be undone.

## VII. Philosophy as Exposure and Redemption

Philosophy can seek a literature of redemption, and sometimes find one that approaches scripture. Cavell takes Thoreau to be writing

sacred text, which from a literary point of view means he must adopt a form that comprehends creation, fall, judgment, and redemption; within it he will have discretion over how much poetry to include, and the extent of the moral code he prescribes; and there is room in it for an indefinite amount of history and for a smaller epic or two.<sup>36</sup>

Are Cavell’s essays ever redemptive? His “prose arias,” as one insightful commentator calls them, invite me not only to thrill or shudder at the music heard, its rendering, or even rebirth in performance.<sup>37</sup> They prepare

me to leave with mood and melody still vibrant, singing still in commemoration, and in one's own voice. What rubs off from his performances is permission to hear the texts in one's own voice, in a register of emotion, uncertainty, and conviction somehow attuned to *his*. If he redeems sense and passion in the world, I may follow (or not). And philosophy might redeem the way playing the piano effortlessly can, by opening a domain of matchless intelligibility (and darkness) beyond the critical, schooled intelligibility that comes with disambiguating a sentence or composing an argument. We hear in thoughtful autobiography intelligibility streaming in life with others, linguistically and non-linguistically.

Cavell is afflicted by waves of desolation at being forced out of a wider happy family and home life when he was all of seven, a memory interlaced with suffering a father's curse. Yet he also remembers flowing notes, harkens to them as exemplary of what it is to be granted redemption by grace. This is satisfaction on a different order than writing clear argument.

### VIII. Memory

Here is W.E. Sebald in *Campo Santo*, bearing down squarely on literature and redemption:

Why can I not get such episodes out of my mind? Why, when I take the S-Bahn toward Stuttgart city center, do I think every time we reach Feuersee Station that the fires are still blazing above us, and since the terrors of the last war years, even though we have rebuilt our surroundings so wonderfully well, we have been living in a kind of underground zone? Why did it seem to the traveler on a winter night . . . that the network of lights [from the new administrative complex] glittered in the darkness like a constellation of stars spreading all over the world, so that these Stuttgart stars are visible not only in the cities of Europe, the boulevards of Beverly Hills and Buenos Aires, but wherever columns of trucks with their cargoes of refugees move along the dusty roads, obviously never stopping, in the zones of devastation that are always

spreading somewhere, in the Sudan, Kosovo, Eritrea, or Afghanistan? So what is literature good for? Am I, Hölderlin asked himself, to fare like the thousands who in their springtime days lived in both foreboding and love, but were seized by the avenging Fates on a drunken day, secretly and silently betrayed, to do penance in the dark of an all too sober realm where wild confusion prevails in the treacherous light, where they count slow time in frost and drought, and man still praises immortality in sighs alone? The synoptic view across the barrier of death presented by the poet . . . is both overshadowed and illuminated, however, by the memory of those to whom the greatest injustice was done. There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship.<sup>38</sup>

In a time of mass death, in Haiti, Rwanda, or Auschwitz, what is literature – or philosophy? Can it effect restitution of the human? Can *teaching* literature or philosophy or religion help in such times? Can I bare my soul in settings that deny souls? Can teaching Cavell or Sebald heal or restore? In the background lurks the thought that after mass-extinctions of the sort that Germans and Rwandans (and so many others) have endured, human being is no longer possible. Is gutting the landscape of a German or Jewish soul gutting the possibility that any future Jew or German can have soul to revive in narration?



Henry James ends a story with a writer confessing:

*We work in the dark -- we do what we can --*

*we give what we have.*

*Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task.*

*The rest is the madness of art.*<sup>39</sup>

We work in the dark when we read Sebald, Rousseau, or certain passages from George Eliot. Or when we read Cavell on the lurching growl of a father, or the lyrical poise of a mother. Or read certain passages from Thoreau in loping train with a fox. Half of the dark is not knowing how, or *whether*, that dark can illuminate our own dark woods -- not knowing how much the passion of these words will rearrange our passions, if they do at all. Will they attain the madness, the slight mitigations, of art?

A restitution through writing, thinking, and art, might obtain as these moments are exposed in a classroom, moments that uncover remnants of soul even in the telling of its destruction. A writer's passionate speech gives a haunting sense of what a survivor might be true to -- how that survivor could live beyond curses, lurching, and ashes.



For the last word, Yehuda Amichai, again.

*I don't imagine that on the night of the Exodus from Egypt,  
Between midnight and dawn, any couple could lie together  
In love. (We could have.) In haste  
Blood dripping from lintels and doorposts,  
Silver and gold dishes clanging in the dark, between firstborn's  
Stifled death cry and the shrieking of mother's wombs  
Emptying like wineskins. And standing over them, legs wide apart,  
The Angel of Death, crotch gaping male and female  
Like a bloody sun in the thick of frizzled black death.  
Sandaled feet slapping against the soft dough of matza*

*And the flesh of belly and thigh, hard belts  
Cinched tight at the waist, buckles  
Scraping against skin, tangled in one another.  
To roll like that, locked in eternal love,  
with all the rabble from the house of slavery  
into the Promised Desert.* <sup>40</sup>



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#### NOTES

*Thanks to Bill Day for an invitation to speak on Cavell on an occasion celebrating his work, held at LeMoyne College 2009. An abbreviated version was read at a conference on Selves among Selves, at Syracuse University, 2011. I thank Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn for the invitation. On both occasions it was a pleasure at the invitation to join collegial discussion where self, other, affect, reason, individual and community, swirled to find common and uncommon ground, in and out of the corrals of religion and philosophy, political science and history, literature and poetry. I'm at home in, and promote, such fluid space. Thanks also to an Israeli colleague for Yehuda Amichai, and to Ada Jaarsma for extremely helpful comments.*

<sup>1</sup> Amichai, Yehuda, *Open Closed Open*, Harcourt, 2000, p. 25

<sup>2</sup> *Appalachian Mountain Club White Mountain Guide*, 1976 edition, (Boston: AMC Books, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Dante begins his *Divine Comedy* reporting that midway in his life he finds himself in a dark wood.

<sup>4</sup> David Rothenberg, *Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature*. Athens: U of Georgia Press, 2002, p. 123.

<sup>5</sup> See my "Preservative Care: Saving Intimate Voice in the Humanities" in *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell*, Continuum 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Cavell introduces "passionate utterance" roughly 40 years later as a semi-formal rubric extending the domain of what John Austin (in *How to do things with words*, 1955) called "performative utterance." See "Passionate and Performative Utterance," *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman, Oxford 2005, Ch 10, esp. 192-3.

"A performative utterance is an offer of participation in the order of law. And perhaps we can say: A passionate

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utterance is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.” See Stanley Cavell “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, 185).

<sup>7</sup> This sort of writing is explored (and enacted) throughout Cavell’s *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory*, Stanford, 2010. See also, William Day, “A Soteriology of Reading: Cavell’s Excerpts from Memory”, *Stanley Cavell, Literature, and Criticism*, ed. Andrew Taylor, Manchester, 2011, and Mark D. Jordan, “The Modernity of Christian Theology, or Writing Kierkegaard Again for the First Time,” *Modern Theology* July 2011, vol 27 #3, 442-51.

<sup>8</sup> “The Availability” is reprinted in Cavell’s *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, Ch 2. It helps to reread this early ’62 essay in a theological vein, as an invitation to read *Philosophical Investigations* in an existential, theological, and ‘continental’ light.

<sup>9</sup> See above, note 4.

<sup>10</sup> We need sharp awareness of the differences between biology, say, and the narratives of *Genesis*. *Genesis* shouldn’t compete with evolutionary biology. To think of *Genesis* as bad biology is, as one wit says, like saying that ballet is a botched way of running for a bus.

<sup>11</sup> George Eliot exemplifies a hope shared by Cavell’s ‘moral perfectionism’: ethics not only can tell us how to restrain the bad but, as importantly, what might release the good – as imaginative vision might. See Stanley Bates, “Stanley Cavell and Ethics”, *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge, Cambridge, 2003, ch. 2.

<sup>12</sup> I discuss one passion correcting another thus bypassing Reason in *Lost Intimacy*, ch. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Middlemarch*, ch 20. For the danger Eliot seems to sense in too close contact with the otherness of things, see note 25, below.

<sup>14</sup> In another context, I suggest that biblical ethics often is delivered in narratives that, like a Kafka parable, raise the most profound questions while refusing satisfying answers. See “Witness to the Face of the River: Thinking with Levinas and Thoreau”, (authored with Lyman Mower), *Faces of Nature: Levinasian Ethics and Environmental Philosophy*, Eds. William Edelglass, Chris Diehm, and Jim Hatley, Duquesne University Press, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> We learn promises (a paradigmatic Austinian performative) first as making and marking a bond to parents and siblings, for instance. As a child grows and reconfigures herself, one part of “the self” can make promises to another: say one vows or promises oneself to be a better violinist or listener. Cavell puts it epigrammatically: “the ‘having’ of a self is being the other to one’s self, calling upon it with the words of others.” Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages, Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1995, p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> I borrow here from *Lost Intimacy*, p. 114.

<sup>17</sup> English-speaking philosophers in the 70s and 80s called 19th and 20th century German and French philosophers that they wanted to disown, “continental philosophers,” caricatured as longwinded, wedded to jargon and obfuscation. The ‘continentals’ return the favor by calling their “others” dry and pedantic, removed from living human concerns.” I discuss this conflict in “Self, Others, Goods, and Final Faith,” in *Excursions with Kierkegaard*, Continuum, 2013. Battle

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lines around styles of philosophy (and literary and religious studies that identify with one or the other camp) look religiously sectarian and constrain the possibilities of moving easily between philosophy, piety, critique, literature, and religious sensibility.

<sup>18</sup> Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 16-18. The initial chapter appears in *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 2006.

<sup>19</sup> William Day, "A Soteriology of Reading: Cavell's Excerpts from Memory."

<sup>20</sup> *The Maine Woods* was not published in Thoreau's lifetime. *A Week on the Concord* never sold, and has been overshadowed to the present day by *Walden*.

<sup>21</sup> See Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, Free Press, 2011. The book's mention of a "secular age" is belied by the fact that it defends "the sacred" in Homer, Dante, Melville, and others.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Morrison, *Beloved*, Knopf, 1987, 87-89.

<sup>23</sup> See "Ktaadn", Lewis Hyde, *The Collected Essays of Henry D Thoreau*, North Point Press, 2002, p. 113. Aristotle uses *sensus communis* to refer to the human capacity to unify inputs from the various sense organs, providing a rudimentary sense of orientation and contact. This basic orientation allows delight in nature and a sense of aliveness across class, education, ethnicity or local knowledge. Thus Thoreau links "contact" with 'the common sense' as he struggles for orientation. The path from "the common sense" and aliveness to judgments of taste is traced in Kant's *Third Critique*. See John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*, Duke University Press, 1990. I discuss what I call "contact knowledge" in *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*," Ashgate, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Cavell takes philosophy to be a "willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about. . ." and "a willingness to allow questions for itself which it cannot answer with satisfaction. . . ." It provides "ways to think, that are worth the time of your life to discover." *Themes Out of School*, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> I discuss Cavell's claims that "the only correct blindness is love" and that in "love of the world" -- not in anti-skeptical arguments -- one finds rest from wholesale philosophical doubts, in *Lost Intimacy*, pp. 118, 127, 185.

<sup>26</sup> Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Walk 2, Penguin, 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Rousseau first says his "frail being flowed out". He is lost in his immersion in things, things overwhelming any sense of self that perceives. And perhaps there is a flow from 'outside in,' as objects of perception flow in to flood the perceiver, who disappears as anything separate from incoming perceptions? The coldness of the stream into which I plunge my hand is the coldness of the hand so plunged. Coldness, hand, and stream become an experientially undifferentiated plenum. As the leafy tree is perceived, it floods out Jean Jacques as a perceiver apart. In speaking of the roar of things before which the self dies, George Eliot may be sensing that perception and perceived can become one in a moment of terror-and-joy, a frighteningly ravishing calm.

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<sup>28</sup> See *Elegy for Iris*, John Bayley, St Martins, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Gillian Rose, *Love's Work*, New York Review Books, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> In tracing how anticipations and memories of suffering, joy, and redemption, can seem simultaneously secular and sacred (calling into question the stability of that divide), I set aside exploring the way perceiving and speaking through passionate bodies is marked by gender, disability, race, weight, age, intelligence, beauty, or disfigurement. Awareness of marked bodies has to enter our pedagogies of self and soul. I thank Ada Jaarsma for starting my thinking on this.

<sup>31</sup> Thoreau finds that sort of serenity at Walden as he lies in his boat looking skyward (*Walden or Life in the Woods* (Charleston: Forgotten Books, 2008), 123-41). Later in *Reveries*, Rousseau also lays in a boat alone, looking serenely upward (Fifth Walk). For Thoreau merging in a dance with a fox, see his Journals, January 30, 1841, and my fuller discussion in "Wonder and Affliction: Thoreau's Dionysian World", *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy*, ed. Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy, Autobiographical Exercises*, Harvard, 1994, p. 17–19.

<sup>33</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, "The Spouter Inn," ch 3, many editions.

<sup>34</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*.

<sup>35</sup> We have to insist that intelligibility is not justification. Ethics is as much seeking the light of understanding as proving a case or producing action guides.

<sup>36</sup> *Senses of Walden, Expanded Edition*, North Point Press, 1981, p. 14f.

<sup>37</sup> Garrett Stewart, "The Avoidance of Stanley Cavell", *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell Goodman, Oxford, 2005, ch 8.

<sup>38</sup> Sebald, *Campo Santo*, "An Attempt at Restitution", Modern Library 2005.

<sup>39</sup> James, "The Middle Years," (the short story), 1893, in *The Tales of Henry James*, Edward Wagenknecht, Frederick Ungar, 1984.

<sup>40</sup> Amichai, Yehuda, *Open Closed Open*, Harcourt, 2000, p. 25