



Beyond the Philosopher's Fear
A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and
Religion in Modern Skepticism

Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey

ASHGATE e-BOOK

BEYOND THE PHILOSOPHER'S FEAR

Beyond the Philosopher's Fear is I believe the first extended study published of my writing that brings to it a systematically religious perspective. I find the result heartening and productive, in two principal ways. First, this perspective allows a continuous stance from which to look back, as from its beyond, on the writing's claims to the philosophical, to follow its intent to enter and sustain philosophy's questioning of itself, of ourselves. Second, this perspective, in Ludger Viefhues-Bailey's scrupulous and ambitious undertaking, allows for the trajectory of half a century of writing to be taken as, let us say, one unfolding project, something always ahead of itself, unfinished, from various beginnings to various ends, perpetually – so far as talent has permitted it to be – tentative, exploratory, meditative. It joins the circle of reflections on these years of work – and extensions along the lines of it, and points of departure from it – for which I feel the clearest gratitude.

*Professor Emeritus Stanley Cavell,
Department of Philosophy, Harvard University*

INTERSECTIONS: CONTINENTAL AND ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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In recent years, the familiar division within modern Western philosophy between what are commonly called its ‘analytical’ and its ‘Continental’ forms has been questioned from both sides of the divide. A new generation of philosophers, often benefiting from a far more pluralistic training in the history and methods of both ‘traditions’, have begun to work in ways which promise to make the terms of this traditional division irrelevant.

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Beyond the Philosopher's Fear

A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and Religion
in Modern Skepticism

LUDGER H. VIEFHUES-BAILEY
Yale University, USA

ASHGATE

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
1 Introduction	1
Cavell: Between the Continentals and the Analytics	3
Cavell on Skepticism and Gender?	4
The Cavellian Feminine, Kristeva, and the Need for a New Religious Imagination	7
From Language to Gender to Religion	8
2 Cavell on Language: What is it in Language that Makes the Skeptical Worry Possible?	11
What do Wittgenstein's Criteria Reveal about Language?	11
From Criteria to Projection	20
3 Cavell on Possessing Language: What Makes the Skeptical Worry Unavoidable?	39
The Skeptic's Humanity	39
Speaking: Privacy and Public	55
Emersonian Authorship as the Office of All Language Users	70
4 Beyond the Singing Body? Gender and Skepticism	83
A Community of Mutual Conversation	83
The Unknown Woman	102
Gender and Skepticism	116
The Gender of Skepticism	122
5 Beyond the Philosopher's Fear: Nostalgia for Mothers and Other Origins	125
Neighboring the Beyond	125
Kristeva's Voice	132
A Theological History of Skepticism	145
A New Religious Imagination for the Morning After or a New Science of the Human	155
<i>Bibliography</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	175

To My Parents

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List of Abbreviations

<i>AT</i>	<i>Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow</i>
<i>CHU</i>	<i>Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy</i>
<i>CT</i>	<i>Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman</i>
<i>DK</i>	<i>Disowning Knowledge</i>
<i>IQO</i>	<i>In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism</i>
<i>MWM</i>	<i>Must We Mean What We Say?</i>
<i>Pitch</i>	<i>A Pitch of Philosophy</i>
<i>POH</i>	<i>Pursuits of Happiness</i>
<i>SOW</i>	<i>Senses of Walden</i>
<i>WV</i>	<i>The World Viewed</i>

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This is a book about the philosophy of Stanley Cavell; the role gender plays in his work; and the significance of a renewed religious imagination for the task of overcoming the life of skepticism.¹ By addressing the issues of skepticism, gender,

1 For a quick overview of Cavell's work see: Hilary Putnam, 'Introducing Cavell,' in Ted Cohen (ed.), *Pursuits of Reason. Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University, 1993), pp. vii–xii. Recently, Cavell's work has begun to attract the deserved attention both in Germany and in France: cf. The 'Schwerpunkt Cavell' in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 46 (1998); Sandra Laugier, 'Lire Cavell,' *Archives de Philosophie*, 61.1 (1998): 5–32. Doménach, Élise, 'Stanley Cavell: Les chemins de la reconnaissance,' in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 96 (1998): 496–511. The following titles are book-length studies of Cavell's work: Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989) connects Cavell's treatment of skepticism with poststructuralist literary theorists and philosophers like Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and Stanley Fish. Richard Fleming, *The State of Philosophy. An Invitation to a Reading in Three Parts of Stanley Cavell's The Claim of Reason* (London and Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993). Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell. Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Fleming gives a detailed reading of Cavell's magnum opus, *The Claim of Reason*. Mulhall provides the most systematic reading of Cavell's entire work available at present. Timothy Gould, *Hearing Things. Voice and Method in the Writing of Stanley Cavell* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Gould uncovers a connection between the voice within Cavell's writing and the voices Cavell appeals to through the methods of ordinary language philosophy. Gould demonstrates that out of these very questions of voice and method Cavell constructed a new model of philosophical method, based on elements of the act of reading. Recently, two important collections of essays on Cavell have appeared: Russell B. Goodman (ed.), *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Richard Eldridge, *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The essays touch on the issues of Cavell's relationship to Romanticism; his struggle with the disciplinary confinements of philosophy; his work on drama, opera, literature, and movies; his vision of normativity in language and the role criteria play in the construction of skepticism; his understanding of ethics; and his insistence on American philosophy. These volumes present an important step in the reception of Cavell's work; yet more needs to be done. For example, a meaningful discussion of Cavell's work on film or theater is absent in the collection in the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*. I agree with Stephen Mulhall's assessment that R. Fleming's and M. Payne's collection of articles edited as *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), while addressing literary themes and cinema in Cavell's work, do not provide a sustained evaluation of those themes and their philosophical roots in Cavell's thinking 'in any real depth.' As an example see, Richard P. Wheeler's 'Acknowledging Shakespeare: Cavell and the Claim of the Human' in Fleming and Payne's volume. The same is true, says Mulhall, for the limited focus of Fischer, M., *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*, p.

and religion, and by doing so in the context of Cavell's work, the following pages inevitably provoke the issue of what are the outlines and characteristics of philosophy. Cavell's work raises this question again and again; with its halting and excruciatingly complex sentences; its turn to literature, opera, film, and lately dance; and with the celebration of the 'feminine' voice as therapy for the skeptical worry. How can this be philosophy?² Or, in contrast, how could philosophy be itself without these turns? And, finally, where could we find thinking – in Cavell's Emersonian understanding – if not on the borders of modern philosophy – including its border to religious imagination? These fundamental questions arise for Cavell out of a meticulous reading of Wittgenstein and Austin in his own analysis of modern skepticism. Likewise, the questions of gender and religion, which – as I will argue – Cavell's work provokes, are intrinsically linked to his understanding of language and of our roles as speakers. Before we begin however tracing the Cavellian vision of language with a discussion of Wittgensteinian and Austinian criteria in this chapter, let me describe the somewhat broader philosophical context in which I read Cavell's work.

What makes Cavell's oeuvre important for contemporary philosophy, why should philosophers care about his reflections on the feminine, and how does religion become an issue for his thinking?

To address these questions I will first say something about Cavell's ability to connect Anglo-Saxon and Continental philosophical concerns surrounding language; secondly, I will introduce Cavell's understanding of skepticism and how it relates to issues of gender; finally, I will say something about his Freudian conception of the feminine and how it expresses (and conceals) a religious problem. I will not, however, provide a *status questionis* of the issue of gender in Cavell. This is partially due to the fact that, until now, this topic has not received sustained attention among the interpreters of Cavell, as I will show. Moreover, this book wants to argue that the urgency of the question of gender and religion arises only out of a look at Cavell's philosophical project as a whole. To this end, the chapters of this book will trace

viii). Fischer's work examines the impact of Cavell's work on contemporary poststructuralist literary theory. Both the Eldridge and the Goodman volumes on the other hand thematize his important stand on Cavell's work. Notably absent is, however, the issue of gender.

2 How can we count as a well-argued contribution to philosophy the meandering *Claim of Reason* (CR) with its baffling or ironic attempt to give a table of contents, or how can his excursions to literature or his evocation of Greta Garbo contribute to our theories of knowledge? Richard Fleming writes after dissecting on 150 pages the argumentative structure of the CR: 'An understanding of *The Claim of Reason* cannot help but produce a feeling of disappointment with the argument of *The Claim of Reason* ... Cavell, himself, shows constant dissatisfaction with what he does in the text' (Fleming, *The State of Philosophy*, p. 151f.). One is left still constantly in search for the 'lived context' in which this argument can come to life, writes Fleming. On the other hand, Stephen Mulhall takes this beginning of the CR, to be expressive of Cavell's broader question of how to begin (with newness) in philosophy, in 'On Refusing to Begin,' in Russell B. Goodman (ed.), *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 22–36. As we will see, Cavell's work confronts the reader with a *particular vision of philosophy*, one in which reading 'requires from first to last that one take the time to try the claims on oneself' (*IQO*, p. 120).

the main subjects of Cavell's work – from his interpretations of Wittgenstein, Shakespeare, and Emerson to his work on film and opera. The introduction will thus end with an overview of these chapters.

Cavell: Between the Continentals and the Analytics

Cavell locates himself on the intersection between the Continental and the Anglo-Saxon traditions: 'Something like the healing of the rift between the English and the German traditions of philosophy – or failing that the witnessing of it – has ... been a motive of my writing from its earliest to its later installments.'³ What characterizes this rift? Jean-Jacques Lecercle describes, with reference to Deleuze and Guattari, the differences between Continental and analytic philosophers in the following way: the analytic project presupposes a picture in which language is primarily aimed at conveying information between cooperating individuals who are fully in control of their linguistic utterances. This vision of language 'reduces the social element to the strategic choices of a group of individual subjects.' The eminently social reality of natural language is thus understood as produced by the choices, and this means intentions, of individual speakers. The trans-individual element in language is then called 'grammar' and it is treated as 'an innate faculty of the mind (the faculty of language that produces a Chomskyan universal grammar), a faculty that is present in each individual on the basis of his or her humanity.'⁴ The Continental traditions, on the other hand, see language not as a field of irenic cooperation of innately competent language users. Language is rather a site of conflict between speakers who are simultaneously subjected to and responsible for their common language.⁵

Varying both the analytic individualism and Continental theme of language as a site of relationship, Cavell's work probes the picture of a human self in linguistic relationships and of language as maintained by a human self in relation. These relationships are neither abstract nor irenic. Rather, they are characterized by desire and contention. Not unlike some erotic affairs, our linguistic intercourses can become the site of violence. The dangerous and fulfilling liaisons of heterosexual couples provide therefore (and not surprisingly) the examples for Cavell's analysis of the perils and promises of language use. Similarly, the desire for communion and for aversion, characterize our relationships in language. As we will see, *we* come into being as and how we speak in Cavell's vision of language.

A philosophical refusal to account for this relationality in and of language is itself an act of avoidance of being in a relationship, according to Cavell. He is keenly aware that it is incorrect to see language as a commodity that – while more or less unequally distributed in practice – is *in principle* equally accessible to everyone regardless of gender, race, or social location. In contrast, Cavell's work allows us to

3 Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden. An Expanded Edition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1972]), p. 149.

4 Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'Philosophies du langage analytique et continentale: de la scène de ménage à la méprise créatrice,' *Le Déclin de La Philosophie Analytique. L'Aventure Humaine. Savoirs, Libertés, Pourvoirs*, 9 (1999): 11–22, p. 17f. English translation mine.

5 Cf. Lecercle, 'Philosophies du langage analytique et continentale,' p. 21.

ask: How gendered is the world that our words reflect? Is this a 'masculine world' – a world in which women are forced to inhabit imaginative spaces that are the product of male fantasies and fears?⁶ Are there words for the experiences of women? Cavell raises these questions not only in his discussions of skepticism and Shakespearean drama (for example, are there words for Cordelia to express her love for Lear?). His attention to the skeptical problem and his close reading of Wittgenstein allows Cavell to develop a vision of language that inevitably leads to these issues of gender and violence in speaking. In so doing, he connects Anglo-Saxon philosophy's linguistic concerns with themes reflected upon in other places in the academy (for example, in the corpus of cultural theory, feminist studies, and in the blending of Freudian psychology and Continental philosophy).

Cavell on Skepticism and Gender?

At the center of Cavell's philosophical enterprise stands his engagement with what Cavell calls the 'pervasiveness of the threat of skepticism,' a philosophical position that he understands to be the 'opening gesture in modern philosophy' (*AT*, p. 1). Admittedly, Cavell uses 'skepticism' in a very broad sense. He understands it as both the denial that we can know with certainty *and* the desire to refute this denial. In a more conventional understanding 'skepticism is the denial of knowledge.'⁷ Here, the skeptic is thought of as a person who says something like 'You don't have any knowledge,' or 'You don't have any empirical knowledge,' or 'You don't know what is going on in someone else's mind.'⁸ For Cavell, however, not only the denial of our having epistemic certainty, but the whole quest for epistemic

6 Diane Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable. Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 141. Jonte-Pace's *Speaking the Unspeakable*, for example, explores how Freudian imagery of woman violently reappears in contemporary American culture. In the epilogue to her book, Jonte-Pace describes a collection of bizarre web pages promoting violence and 'revenge' against women. She cautions us not to dismiss these and similar phenomena as simply representing extreme examples from the mad fringes of the Internet and society. Rather, as Jonte-Pace writes, these productions act out an (otherwise repressed but omnipresent) desire for violence against the woman (and the mother in particular). She sees this violence reflected in the Freudian understanding of self and more generally implied in modern visions of subjectivity. Observations like these provoke the question of what words are available for women to express their experiences in a world captivated by the association of mother, woman, the uncanny, and death. What visions of self are prepared for women to inhabit?

7 Putnam, 'Introducing Cavell,' p. vii.

8 Keith DeRose's formalization of the argument of what he calls the skeptical hypothesis gives an apt description of a standard understanding of skepticism (Keith DeRose, 'Introduction: Responding to Skepticism,' in Keith DeRose and Ted A. Warfield (eds), *Skepticism. A Contemporary Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 2). In this formalization: '*O* is a proposition one would ordinarily think one knows, and *H* is a suitably chosen skeptical hypothesis: The Argument by Skeptical Hypothesis: 1. I don't know that not-*H*; 2. If I don't know that not-*H*, then I don't know that *O*; So, C. I don't know that *O*.'

certainly itself is a philosophical expression of the skeptical impulse.⁹ Thus, the very philosophical attempts trying to refute the skeptical challenge, such as the projects of the metaphysical realists or the positivists, are themselves forms of skepticism. The underlying idea is that skepticism is motivated by a deep-seated dissatisfaction with what the skeptic perceives as our human epistemic condition. This however is a dissatisfaction that we should not simply dismiss. Rather, the skeptic's plight of mind reveals a frightening truth, as Cavell writes:

Horror is the title I am giving to the perception of the precariousness of human identity, to the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for; *that our origins as human beings need accounting for, and are unaccountable.* [CR, p. 418, italics added]

The skeptical impulse is thus best understood as a desire to recoil from the truth in skepticism. The skeptic wishes to leave behind a precarious epistemological position – a position that would reveal in turn the precarious nature of our identities and origins. In Cavell's reading, the skeptic sees that the origin of what counts as our humanity involves a sense of self and identity that is fraught with ambiguity and fear. In this analysis, skepticism is simultaneously the philosophical denial of this very fear and its expression.

Cavell's dealings with skepticism are interlaced with his reflections on what constitutes modern philosophy and how it borders literature, film, drama, and opera. By crossing and exploring these borders Cavell thematizes (and struggles with) the worry that the modern project of philosophy is expressive of, and fueled by, masculine conceptions of knowledge, which inevitably lead to violence against women. Is Othello's murderousness a perspicuous representation of the consequences of the skeptic's frustrated desire for knowledge? Does the skeptical obsession with certainty express a *human* or a *male* fear – a fear that is related to masculine constructions of language and self? Is skepticism a human problem addressed and solved by philosophy, or is skepticism part of the production of male ways of knowing encoded in philosophy? Cavell explicitly raises this question, yet his answers remain ambiguous. He talks about the (in his understanding) traumatic 'possibility that philosophical skepticism is inflected, if not altogether determined by gender, by whether one sets oneself aside as masculine or feminine. And if philosophical skepticism is thus inflected then, according to me, philosophy as such will be' (CT, p. 100). However, it is not clear from his writings how he answers this traumatic question. At times he states that skepticism is a 'male affair' (*Pitch*, p. 169); yet at other times he writes that skepticism is a human problem (CT, p. 94). His wavering is easy to understand: if skepticism and its pursuit of knowledge is the center around which modern philosophy revolves, and if this problem is an expression of male issues of self and gender, then modern philosophy revolves around and aims at solving male problems.

Both the Goodman and Eldridge volumes bring attention to the philosophical importance of Cavell's dealings with literature, drama, film, and opera; yet neither book contains a section or even an article on the issue of gender in his work. This

9 In DeRose's scheme, the desire to disprove 1 expresses skepticism according to Cavell.

is surprising since the reflections on the feminine play such an important role in Cavell's writings about Shakespeare, Hollywood comedies or dramas, and operas.¹⁰ Despite the prominent role that gender plays for Cavell, currently no monograph addresses in a systematic manner the problematic issues of gendered speaking and gendered knowledge in the context of his philosophy as a whole.¹¹ Feminist philosophers of film have dedicated the clearest attention to Cavell's constructions of gender. Despite the deep sympathy some philosophers, such as Naomi Scheman, feel for Cavell's work, his Freudian constructions of gender pose severe problems for most. Summarizing his work's reception in feminist film theory, Cynthia Freeland describes this difficulty: 'Cavell's work is not without problems for feminists who have disagreed about its usefulness for philosophical reflections about gender roles, social relations, or the social values reflected in marriage.' While Cavell offers a basis to critique traditional constructions of gender, his notion of the feminine is too easily co-opted by masculinist interests, as Scheman points out.¹² This is a difficulty illustrated by Tania Modleski's exasperated reaction to Cavell's writings on film.¹³ Modleski sees Cavell as part of an attempt of male academics 'to relocate the struggle of feminism against patriarchy to a place entirely within patriarchy and within the psyche of the patriarch himself' (p. 10). In his reply to Modleski, Cavell does not fully address this point. He feels that Modleski refuses to acknowledge that it deeply worries him that his Emersonianism might 'serve once more to eradicate the feminine difference' (*CT*, p. 33). While I feel that Cavell is indeed genuinely troubled, I will show how Cavell's Freudian symbolism of gender invites, despite himself, a feminist reading such as Modleski's. For example, Cavell's idea that the 'feminine' voice can be realized by all of us, independent of whether we take ourselves to be men or women, still operates within problematic psychoanalytic assumptions of gender. Thus, while Cavell provides the conceptual space needed for a gender analysis of skepticism (and hence modern philosophy), his understanding of gender and his own use of a Freudian symbolism of gender need a systematic and critical exploration.

10 Surprisingly silent on question of gender is Irène Théry, 'L'énigme de l'égalité, mariage et différence des sexes dans A la recherche du bonheur,' in Sandra Laugier and Marc Cerisuelo (eds), *Stanley Cavell, Cinéma et Philosophie* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2001), pp. 67–93.

11 Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Moi uses Cavell in her readings of Simon de Beauvoir by inquiring into the relationship between speaking for oneself and speaking for others. Despite her deep sympathy for Cavell's work she does not enter into a systematic and critical reading of the issues of gender in Cavell's own philosophy of skepticism.

12 Cynthia Freeland, 'Film Theory,' in Alison M. Jaggar and Iris M. Young (eds), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 351–60, p. 358; Naomi Scheman, 'Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women,' *Critical Inquiry*, 15:1 (1988): 62–89, p. 66ff.

13 Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women. Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991). A more positive reading of Cavell's interpretation of these movies is found in: Teresa De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Nevertheless, as we will see, Modleski's point deserves closer examination.

Otherwise, the violence implied in the psychoanalytic imagination of self would be simply repeated.

Stephen Mulhall, however, cautions that we

cannot dismiss his [Cavell's] picture of male and female on the grounds that [it] invokes a potentially reductive and oppressive binary opposition; we must rather show the precise points – if any – at which the complex, provisional, and open-ended elucidation of that opposition which emerges across the full range of his work is reductive or oppressive.¹⁴

My book aims to take up Mulhall's challenge by revealing the precise points where Cavell's symbolism of gender has oppressive consequences. To do so I will analyze Cavell's work on film and opera, which offers a complex picture of how he understands the women's role in the process of gaining, threatening, and regaining attunement and language. My discussion will show how Cavell's symbolism of gender, despite its complexity, re-establishes the very oppressive binary that he wishes to overcome. In Cavell's work, the 'feminine,' the 'creative,' the 'absent,' and the 'beyond' are all aligned, thereby leaving the woman with the task of playing both the role of the victim of male skeptical violence and the role of the savior of men and women from this very violence.

The Cavellian Feminine, Kristeva, and the Need for a New Religious Imagination

From whence, however, this problematic role of 'the woman' in Cavell's work? I will argue that underlying Cavell's uneasy symbolism of gender we find in fact a *religious* tension. While Cavell expresses in his early work that 'respectable further theologizing of the world has, I gather, ceased,' his later writings on women in film and opera present us with his longing gaze for a transcendent, a beyond, from which to imagine what it means to be human (*DK*, p. 36 fn.). The fear of exposure to a woman turns out to be the fear of exposure to a beyond we cannot control. It is not farfetched to read through a prism of gender the following remark from *The Claim of Reason*: 'the other now bears the weight of God' (*CR*, p. 470). The woman is this other.

According to Cavell, philosophy needs this exposure to the beyond in order to create new visions of humanity. As we will see, the diva in opera and film dramatically exposes humanity's need for self-creation, while at the same time stressing that such self-creation is only possible if we philosophers – like her – expose our bodies to the uncontrollable beyond. The body of the diva is thus the locus of both human autonomy and humanity's passive exposure to something beyond our control.

Bringing Cavell into dialogue with a particular women's voice, namely Julia Kristeva as a critically and attentive reader of Freud, will help to discern the entanglement of gender, religion, and philosophy. In an essay on Nietzsche, Cavell describes philosophy as a form of 'criticism of culture.' And 'one way to think of this is as the attempt, or need, to inherit, as part of the criticism of religion, the task of

14 Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell*. p. 341.

religion as a criticism of life, after the authority of religion has become questionable.¹⁵ It is certainly questionable whether the authority of 'religion' *tout court* has become questionable for everyone; yet reading Cavell while hearing Kristeva will disclose in Cavell's project of transforming the skeptical life vestiges of the desire for this authority and a desire for an alternate religious imagination.

Cavell describes our ordinary lives and its languages as 'vulnerable ... to skepticism, but with the understanding that skepticism wears as many guises as the devil' (*AT*, p. 2). Our ordinary lives and words are currently exposed to multiple religious imaginations. While these wear many disguises, philosophy (particularly understood as the project of overcoming skepticism) need not fear all of them as if they were the devil. The question is rather, to see *what kind of religious imagination* is tied to the skeptical vision of the human and which is needed for overcoming it. To discern this point we have to engage in an aversive reading of both Cavell's and Kristeva's symbolism of the feminine. The task is to find behind the many disguises alternate religious imaginations that enable something like Emersonian becoming. Implied in philosophy's work of bringing culture to consciousness is not only the task of 'speaking for us' but also the demand to speak in rejection of the given state of a culture: 'The idea is always of liberation from a present state, to a further or next state' (*AT*, p. 121). Thus, far from simply inheriting the authority to critique culture, philosophy has to be part of fashioning an exchange about what counts as becoming human and what as religious imagination. Without such a dialogue, philosophy's attempt at bringing our culture to consciousness is in danger of doing so without critical aversion. The philosopher might claim that he speaks *for us* but he will do so without subjectivity, thus representing a world in which neither he nor we will have a voice of our own.

From Language to Gender to Religion

To introduce us to these issues of gender and religion we have to begin with Cavell's understanding of language. Thus, the first chapter will argue with Cavell that the *absence* of a structure of language securing our agreement in language is the feature of language that invites the skeptic's fear. The surprising fact that we can so easily follow each other's projections in language is not secured by transcendental structures of language. Rather, this fact is enabled in and grounded by nothing else than our being in tune with each other. In this way, language is based upon acknowledged relationships, and a failure of language reveals a failure of relationships. In other words, in language we are exposed to each other. Thus, 'attunement' and 'exposure' will turn out to be central concepts in Cavell's reading of the skeptic's fear.

This discussion of how language functions to make the skeptical worry possible opens the field for an understanding of the vision of self and humanity that is implicated in the skeptical worry. To this end we need to understand how *this* worry can be troubling or how this worry can reflect something about humanity. A simple

15 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on A Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 223.

refutation of the skeptic's project alone would therefore not be enough. Here is a master of language who is burdened by the skeptical question. How does the skeptic come to this point? What makes these questions natural for him? I say for *him*, because, as I will show, the skeptical worry seems to encode a particularly male vision of self and language. (I will in the following talk about the *male* philosopher or male skeptic. This will at times make for an annoying read for those attuned to the importance of gender in writing. In a way this annoyance is a calculated risk to bring to the fore the question of the gendering of modern skepticism and philosophy.)

The second chapter, therefore, will address the question of what it is in 'possessing language' that makes the skeptical worry possible. Which human fears and desires are expressed and denied in skepticism according to Cavell? Or what vision of 'humanity' is projected and recreated by the skeptic? Let me mention here two methodological elements that are pertinent to Cavell's ability to read and listen to the unsaid or the lacunae of sense in the words of the skeptic. First, Cavell wishes to extend an Austinian or ordinary language approach to dealing with the skeptic's sentences. In which context, in which situation would it or could it seem natural to ask the kind of questions the skeptic worries about? If these questions strike, for example, Putnam as if he were in the Jabberwocky's forest, Cavell wishes to understand what makes this particular plight of mind possible.¹⁶ More importantly, understanding the skeptic implies acknowledging that his questions reveal something about what can count as 'our' modern humanity. As we will see, Cavell's Austinian approach enables us to see a context in which it seems (or in which it becomes) natural to speak outside of a context of claiming something. Second, Cavell's theory of reading implies that we as readers are read by texts. The texts we read are projecting images and visions of possible humanity, and thus force us to see ourselves within the context of these projections. Who are we supposed to be as humans in the vision of skeptic? This question can be an application of Cavell's theory of reading onto the skeptic's argument itself. And it can be asked from Cavell's own texts, what vision of the human, of male and female is imagined in his works?

Having set the background of Cavell's philosophizing, the third chapter will analyze in detail the 'gender of skepticism' using primarily Cavell's writings on film. This chapter will set the stage for an exploration of the lines that tie together 'the feminine,' 'absence,' 'the transcendent,' and 'the beyond' in Cavell's thought. And we will see how these ties entangle women to be both victims of, and saviors for, the skeptical complex.

The fourth chapter will first follow Cavell's notion of the 'beyond' and how it connects with the feminine in his work. Secondly, I will explore the psychoanalytic roots of Cavell's connection between 'absence' and 'the woman.' To phrase this exploration in Cavellian terms: 'What makes these associations natural for Cavell?' In other words, what is the intellectual framework within which the woman becomes the stand-in for a threatening and life-giving 'beyond'? Thus, my turn to Cavell's psychoanalytic roots is meant as uncovering not biographical idiosyncrasies. Rather,

16 Hilary Putnam, 'Skepticism, Stroud and the Contextuality of Knowledge,' *Philosophical Explorations*, 4 (2001): 2–16, p. 15.