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Abstract_Title:

A Soteriology of Reading: Cavell's Excerpts from Memory

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Beginning with his first essays, Stanley Cavell has described the work of literary criticism and philosophy in ways that show them to be revealing of one another. More recently, Cavell has drawn parallels between the demands of philosophy as he conceives it and the demands of autobiography. If the former connection is part of a sketch of a theory of criticism – what Cavell has called "a theology of reading" – his recent forays into autobiography reveal an even more soteriological understanding of the point of reading. The first half of the present paper brings out the intimacy between Cavell's practice of philosophy and his literary criticism by following some thoughts in his "The Politics of Interpretation" (1982). Cavell's claim that "the underlying subject" of both criticism and philosophy is "the subject of examples," and his memorable assertion that our interest in a text is explained through the mechanism of transference, suggest that the aim of my reading, if I am the text's patient, is to be guided by it past the risks of its seduction to find myself beyond it, beyond myself as its reader. Similarly, autobiography is a genre preoccupied with the relation between the writer and his or her exemplarity. The second half of the paper shows that the fragment of Cavell's autobiography published as "Excerpts from Memory" (2006) offers an allegory for the redemptive value of reading, not least in that work's climactic retold memory that Cavell labels his "revelation of paternal hatred."