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Abstract_Title:
While Reading Wittgenstein

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Cavell's unusual manner of finding his footing, philosophically, of roughly feeling his way forward and back again as if he were in the dark, comes out of his acute sensitivity to the effects of texts--and though we need not share his impression of what is worth reading, there is this call to share his sense of what reading is. He requires a much finer responsiveness to the material of philosophy, the particular quality of words, the imponderable matter of tone. If we can agree to call these features of Cavell's work 'literary,' they are not the consequence of reading literature, but of wondering about the spirit in which philosophy is read or written, a concern Cavell inherits from Wittgenstein. Perhaps Cavell's literary inclination surfaced during his "attempt to inherit, or receive, the event of the Investigations," after, as he says, "having been so fundamentally affected by Wittgenstein's text" that he determined "to explore not merely the topics it proposed, and transfigured, but the mode in which it presented them, the fact of its remarkable writing." Wittgenstein believed that "philosophy ought really to be written only as poetic composition" and awoke in Cavell the desire to work with creative thinkers--Emerson, Thoreau, Beckett--both literary and philosophical enough to know what that might mean. My purpose would not be to undermine Cavell's investment in literary works but to find in his relation to Wittgenstein the beginning of a literary life.