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Scepticism in Cormac McCarthy's *Stella Maris*

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Abstract

In psychiatry and psychology, as well as in many other disciplines concerned with the well-being of mental patients, there is often an assumption that the problem lies solely within the patient's mind. This assumption produces a baseless picture of the patient's situation that hides her relation to the doctor and to the world that she inhabits. Consequently, for the doctor, the patient herself becomes an impediment to a clear view of her mind. This thesis investigates Cormac McCarthy's Stella Maris *by exploring how the dialogues in the novel, along with the author's choice to omit the third-person point of view, challenge the aforementioned assumption, and uncovers in the picture it produces a scepticism of other minds. Using the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, the picture of the patient's mind being the sole bearer of illness is questioned. Wittgenstein's Private Language Arguments (PLAs) deny that a private language, necessarily understood only by one user, is possible, thereby denying that language can be used for referring to private sessions. Instead, language-use should be understood in terms of its public nature and sharedness. Similarly, Cavell's concept of acknowledgement, derived from Wittgenstein's PLAs, provides a powerful method to evaluate situations in which knowledge of another's mind is a primary concern, such as psychiatric and therapeutic sessions. By employing these ideas, this study advocates for a relational understanding of illness, where the patient must be understood in relation to the world she inhabits. Consequently, knowledge regarding Alicia's illness and pain should be understood as claims upon Cohen to act rather than as references to her private sensation, or as an entrypoint to her frame of reference.*

Keywords: Mental Illness, Scepticism, Private Language Arguments, Acknowledgement, Relationality

Cormac McCarthy's *Stella Maris* is difficult to categorise. Itresembles a play more than a novel, but there are no stage directions or dialogue tags. The reader is presented only with the spoken words of the two principal characters, Alicia and Dr Cohen, in dialogue. A change of speaker is indicated by line-breaks, while each new session begins a new chapter. Occasionally, there are section breaks within chapters. These come after a significant rupture in the conversation during the session itself. Everything else, such as the expression on their faces, needs to be inferred from the dialogue. For instance, the fact of Alicia crying can only come through to the reader if Cohen makes a comment upon it, such as "I'm sorry. I didnt mean to make you cry" (*Stella Maris* 163).

The first page is the only narratorial intervention present, and it acts as an exposition. The readers are presented with a photograph of a building with the heading "Stella Maris", an address "Black River Falls, Wisconsin", and a mission-statement "Since 1950 a non-denominational facility and hospice for the care of psychiatric mental patients" (3). Underneath the mission-statement, the readers find a short report on a nameless patient, referred to as "Case 72-118", and dated "October 27, 1972" (3). The patient is described as "a twenty year-old Jewish/Caucasian female. Attractive, possibly anorexic…doctoral candidate in mathematics at the University of Chicago…paranoid schizophrenic with a longstanding aetiology of visual and auditory hallucinations. Resident of this facility on two prior occasions" (3). These expository bits establish that the terms under which the conversation between Alicia and Dr Cohen takes place is dictated by the conventions of psychiatry, how it understands mental illnesses as well as mental patients, and how it thinks that they should be spoken to, or talked with. Furthermore, the fact

that Alicia is only referred to as "Case 72-118" is significant. First, it reveals the dehumanising attitude that the field of psychiatry bears towards the patients, seeing them as cases, seeing them in their generality rather than in their particularity. Second, in this complex text whose principal character is a mathematical prodigy with unconventional notion about the discipline, such as characterizing mathematical object's claim to independent existence as "evil" (10), it implicates numbers as objects that make themselves readily available for such dehumanization, for the erasure of the subjective and the personal by the objective and the impersonal.

Cormac McCarthy had been working on *Stella Maris* since the 1960s, as can be inferred from his 2009 interview with *The Wall Street Journal* where he speaks about his fifty-year effort at writing a female character, which turned out to be Alicia of the duology. And since he had already cemented himself as a formidable presence in American letters during the nineties, the news of new novels from McCarthy after a sixteen-year gap period since *The Road* in 2006, was welcomed with great hype. A few audio clips of Cormac McCarthy reading excerpts from the novels in Santa Fe Institute's "Genius and Madness" event had already made the rounds of the internet in 2015. The famously reclusive American writer of gothic Southern novels and violent modern Westerns was describing in his new works the discoveries of quantum physisicsts and mathematicians of the 20th century. The fact that the subject matter would delve extensively into the science and mathematics territory ultimately added to its appeal, since McCarthy's previous novels, although heavily influenced by these discourses, had never directly addressed them as discourses, unlike other prominent American writers such as Thomas Pynchon. McCarthy's characters in previous novels had for the most part been illiterate or barely literate, so readers were curious to see how he would present characters who were more than fluent in the language of science and mathematics. In this sense, these really were novel undertaking for McCarthy.

James Wood, writing for *The New Yorker*, characterizes the duology as Cormac McCarthy's first career attempt to "write fiction about 'ideas'" (par. 1), referring to the generic convention of the 'novel of ideas' which is used to categorize fictions dealing primarily with ideas at the expense of other novelistic traits such as plot and character (par. 4). In his essay "The Novel of Ideas" in *British Fiction Since 1945*, Michael Lemahieu, after citing the definition of 'novel of ideas' as found in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, argues:

> The very features that have come to identify the novel - plot, narrative, conflict, depth, character - are those that, this definition would have it, are 'deliberately limited' in the novel of ideas. When it succeeds, therefore, the novel of ideas succeeds inasmuch as it is not quite a novel, in this sense, 'novel of ideas' appears to be a contradiction in terms (177).

And indeed, many critics have found the duology hard to categorize as novels. Jonathan Clarke claims,"*The Passenger* and -*Stella Maris* are not McCarthy's best novels. Perhaps they are not quite novels at all. But they deepen our appreciation of the philosophical exploration that has been his career's deepest motive" (par. 26). This conclusion echoes in many ways James Wood's sentiments regarding the novels as well, that is, they were not McCarthy's best work, and which is at its best when in the realm of the philosophical/metaphysical. However, Clarke's issue is primarily with the lack of unity in these novels, the incorporation of "apparently extraneous material" in what seems to him "McCarthy's attempt, at eighty-nine, to empty his notebooks" (par. 14). James Wood, however, is harsher in his reviews, writing "at the human level, at the level of verisimilitude, these two companion novels are hardly serious" (par. 11). This conclusion comes after he claims that Alicia and Bobby, as portrayed in the novels, are unconvincing. "Alicia is the womanly total package who slays all men, and Bobby is the manly

total package all women would surely die for" (par. 10). It is in fact the problem of verisimilitude that seems to be the main point of criticism levelled against the novels by James Wood in his review, as can be gleaned from this backhanded compliment: "But it would hardly be fair to these novels to neglect to add that, though the protagonists may be improbable, the writing, by and large, is not" (par. 12). Then, after praising McCarthy's writing abilities in a few paragraphs, Wood proceeds to discredit McCarthy's portrayal of Bobby and Alice ruthlessly, but not logically, as will shortly be seen.

The claim he makes is strange: "[T]hese cannot be novels 'about' mathematics, since the novelist lacks the power to do any mathematics" (par. 14). Firstly, to claim that McCarthy cannot do 'any' mathematics is false, and it tells of Wood's own misreading of how mathematics functions as a theme in the novel. He does not seem to realize that a high-schooler solving a calculus problem for her assignment can also be doing mathematics, if she takes the problem seriously enough. Mathematics is just one, but a very powerful, way in which humans have been approaching the world for thousands of years, and it is that primordial role mathematics plays in human experience which informs the duology's concerns. To say that Cormac McCarthy, who was a physics major before dropping out, and who for the latter part of his life worked at the Santa Fe Institute among world-renowned mathematicians and physicians, 'cannot do any mathematics' is bizarre. Secondly, does an author really need to also be a top-level mathematician to write novels about mathematics?

James Wood further argues, "If neither character can be caught in the act of uttering or creating an original mathematical idea, then, curiously enough, these are merely novels about the idea of mathematical ideas" (par. 16). But this distinction between novels about mathematical ideas and novels about the idea of mathematical ideas seems to be unnecessary. However, one

can try to see where James Wood wants to take us. The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges is famous among the mathematicians for having had a mathematical intuition, but he sure was not a top-level mathematician, or in Wood's words, Borges too 'lacks the power to do any mathematics', and yet there he was in the early half of the twentieth century practically obsessed with the idea of infinity at the same time great mathematicians such as Cantor were breaking new grounds in mathematics with their modifications of the concept. Now, Woods surely would not suggest that Cantor was writing fictions about mathematical ideas while Borges was writing only about the ideas of mathematical ideas: because Borges did not have mathematicians as characters, and the concept, such as of infinity, inhabits his stories as metaphysical metaphors. They make no claim for mathematics as much as for metaphysics. Since no character was a mathematician, the problem of having someone discover 'an original mathematical idea' goes out of the window. Therefore, for Wood the duology is not about mathematical ideas but "about mathematicians, and they stand or fall on their ability to make Bobby and Alicia plausible as such" (par. 15). And he thinks that on this account, McCarthy has failed and this failure comes in two aspects, one of which I think can be disregarded while the other might need further analysis. First is this bizarre idea that a fictitious mathematician in a novel should utter 'an original mathematical idea' to be perceived as plausible. One can safely say that this is not the job of the novelist, but of mathematicians. Only mathematicians, and only a few mathematicians at that, can utter truly original mathematical ideas.

The second aspect of his critique of verisimilitude comes to us thus: "Do geniuses actually sound like this? Well, people who are fixated on the idea of genius perhaps sound like this" (par. 18), insinuating that McCarthy has failed to portray Alicia and Bobby as geniuses, but more than that, he suggests they can only talk about other geniuses, but are themselves not so,

just like McCarthy himself. Therefore, he calls McCarthy's work in the novels a "miming of genius" (par 18), as if McCarthy, too, is claiming to be a genius with numbers, and only Woods can see how false that claim is. So in an another backhanded compliment, he claims: "Sure enough, the area where McCarthy can be authoritatively eloquent—can be himself—is the realm not of numbers, where he has only the idea of "genius," but of metaphysics, where he has all the resources of language" (par. 22). I feel 'authoritatively eloquent' is a substitution for the word 'genius', a word that seems to make Wood uneasy.

Wood's uneasiness here seems to come from a passage in *Stella Maris* where Alicia claims that "intelligence is numbers. It's not words. Words are things we've made up. Mathematics is not" (15). For some reason, James Wood supposes Alicia's world-view to be McCarthy's world-view as well. Wood claims that the novelist believes "To traffic in serious mathematics is to commune with truth; to traffic in words, to merely write novels, is to produce dim approximations of the truth" (par. 17), and in what I consider a cheap shot at McCarthy: "This is what too many colloquies at the Santa Fe Institute will do to a novelist's self-esteem" (par. 17). For Woods, McCarthy's relationship with the people at SFI has had a negative impact on his self-esteem as a writer. But Graeme Wood, writing for *The Atlantic,* discusses John Sheddan, a character in *The Passenger* based on a real life close friend of McCarthy's with the same name, in a manner which I think will make it clear that Wood is confusing the world-view of the character Alicia with the world-view of the novelist that created her. Graeme Wood argues:

> [Sheddan] says he knows that Bobby has, like Sheddan, a heart whose loneliness is salved by literature. "But the real question is are we few the last of a lineage?" Wondering about the end of the age of literate culture, he tells his old friend, "The legacy

> of the word is a fragile thing for all its power, but I know where you stand, Squire. I know that there are words spoken by men ages dead that will never leave your heart." These novels feel like McCarthy's effort to produce such words, and to react to the dying of the light with Sheddan'svigor rather than Bobby's and Alicia's despair. The results are not weakly flickering. They are incandescent with life. (par. 23)

Graeme Wood's reading suggests an affinity of the author with the character of Sheddan who has great respect for the power of literature and words, thereby showing that James Wood's reading can be easily contested.

Cormac McCarthy has indicated in interviews that he considers the work done by mathematicians and physicists in the twentieth century to be superior to the work done by the writers and poets at the same time. However, it is wrong to assume like James Wood that Cormac McCarthy completely shares in the worldview of the character Alicia. In fact Alicia, although a self-proclaimed mathematical platonist at one time, does not claim to have the last words regarding the debate, and is actually problematizing the issue: whether humans made mathematics, or if mathematics can exist without humans. The novels will speak on both sides regarding the debate, however, for Alicia it is unethical to divorce mathematics from the human mind. That "music and mathematics come before language, and they come after language; they may outlive us all. We made language up, but we found mathematics, premade" is only one side of the debate (par.18), but James Wood thinks it to be the position that the novelist takes without any doubts, although of Alicia he later claims that "consideration of the end of the world appears to mark the limit of her faith in the "religious" primacy of mathematics" (par. 20), which begs the question: why give that remark about the self-esteem of the author? James Wood seems to miss the fact that uncertainty is a major theme of the novel, that throughout human history the

grounds on which truth can make its claim is constantly doubted: “I wanted to do mathematics. But I wanted to understand it as well. And I never would. I couldnt even frame the question” (*Stella Maris* 96). And yet, James Wood seems to read in Alicia’s statements a certainty rather than an open-endedness. Furthermore, in an interview with David Krakeur, McCarthy has stated that he believes mathematics to be human invention, which is the opposite of mathematical platonism.

The crucial difference between Cormac McCarthy’s view regarding ‘intelligence’ or ‘genius’ and James Wood’s seems to be that for Cormac McCarthy there is such a thing called ‘intelligence’ or ‘genius’ and it might be humanly recognizable, while Wood, for some reason, would like to deny that. However, Alicia’s and McCarthy’s views regarding the matter will need to be further elaborated, before getting on to the crux of the matter: Is Alicia’s representation as geniuses plausible?

Alicia claims the I.Q. tests, specifically the Stanford-Binet, to be racist: “There are no questions about music on the test. For instance. Apparently music doesnt count. So here’s a black guy with a measured IQ of eighty-five who is by any metric you might care to choose a musical genius. Simply off the charts. But to the IQ folks he’s little more than a halfwit” (*Stella Maris* 19). James Wood might believe that the novelist and Alicia get to certain insights “not by arguing it as such but via the barstool admiration of sheer mathematical I.Q” (par. 19), but the way in which Alicia critiques the IQ tests is also one way in which she critiques the popular notion of what doing mathematics means. In other words, she does make some interesting arguments, unlike what James Wood would like us to believe, that they get to their insights simply by ‘barstool admiration’.

First, Alicia believes that there can be some ways in which genius might be recognizable, and the present way (such as that of the Stanfored-Binet), is inadequate as well as biased. James Wood perhaps would like her to believe that there are no ways to recognize 'genius', or question the legitimacy of the 'genius' as a concept itself. What James Wood sees as 'barstool admiration' is actually an argument in which he disagrees with Alicia, only he does not say so. Second, Alicia refers to a black musician in her example of a genius, and I assume a genius who in James Wood's words would "lack the power to do any mathematics" (par. 14). Therefore, Alicia does believe that intelligence is numbers but she she does not believe 'numbers' or 'mathematics' to be what James Wood believes them to be. This is the second interesting argument Alicia makes, that 'counting', whether it is a mathematician counting or a musician, might mean the same type of activity. This provides a new way for us to read the response of Alicia to Dr. Cohen's question "How did it get that way? Intelligence as numerical": "Maybe it always was. Or maybe we actually got there by counting" (*Stella Maris* 19). And in the example of the black musician: "apparently music does not count" can now be read as pun.

Howard Gardner in his essay, following James Wood, argues that Alicia believes in a "definite hierarchy or ranking system for intelligences" (par. 3). Also, following James Wood, he considers the voice of Alicia to be the voice of the literary creation as a whole. Since Howard Gardner believes in the Multiple Intelligences theory, Alicia's view that there is only one form of intelligence, and it is computational, is for him, problematic. In her view, Gardner argues, mathematical abilities is at the top while linguistic abilities on the bottom, with musical intelligence somewhere in between–in the hierarchy of intelligences. There is a contradiction here. If she believes in one form of intelligence, how can there be a hierarchy of intelligences? But Gardner does concede that music, for Alicia, seems also to be equivalent to mathematics in

some senses. But it remains that linguistic abilities is "definitely secondary in importance and profundity" (par. 40). Gardner sums up Alica's position thus: "The universe is inherently numerical—it cannot be any other way—and mathematicians are the ones—for better or worse, the *only* ones—capable of decoding, understanding and explicating that reality" (par. 37). Alicia, however, does not actually hold these views that Gardner is imposing on her. "No one, however inclined to platonism, actually believes that numbers are requisite to the operation of the universe. They're only good to talk about it" (*Stella Maris* 68), Alicia says to Dr. Cohen. Numbers are only tools to be used to talk about the universe, and give far more powerful insights about it than spoken language can, which I think is a fair claim to make.

Moreover, none of the two critics seem to consider Alicia's age. She's just twenty-one, and highly intelligent. This explains the "pomposity" of the "know-it-all" in her behaviour (par. 6), as is also noted by Thomas J Millay who attributes it rather to her status as a "true believer" in the supremacy of mathematics, and not her age (par. 6). Contrary to what Wood says of her characterization, I believe it makes her even more convincing, and her age shows through in her conversational tone.

However, in another twist, Alicia also speculates whether intelligence might not have a fundamental relation to evil. James Wood notes this as well when he labels Alicia a "gnostic pessimist" (par. 22). In a striking passage Alicia says:

> Of course one might also add that intelligence is a basic component of evil. The more stupid you are the less capable you are of doing harm. Except perhaps in a clumsy and inadvertent manner. The word cretin comes from the French chrétien. Supposedly if you could think of nothing good to say about a dullard you would say that he was a good

> Christian. Diabolical on the other hand is all but synonymous with ingenious. What Satan had for sale in the garden was knowledge. (*Stella Maris* 69)

Here, Alicia is associating high intelligence with evil. In the 2009 interview with WSJ, Cormac McCarthy says, "it is more important to be good than it is to be smart" (par 23). Therefore, one can dismiss James Wood's claim that "barstool admiration of sheer mathematical I.Q." is the straight-forward method in which mathematical ideas are brought into discussion (par. 19). The author and the character, are ambiguous regarding the status of words and numbers, as well as truth and genius–but they do make insightful arguments on the matter.

Now, returning to "the ability to make Bobby and Alicia plausible" or the question of "do geniuses actually sound like this?" on which (par. 15), for James Wood, the novel will ultimately "stand or fall" (par 15), John Jeremiah Sullivan, in his review of the books for *The New York Times*, opines, just like James Wood and Johnathan Clarke, that *The Passenger* "is far from McCarthy's finest work" but, contrarily to Wood, claims that McCarthy "has tried something in these novels that he'd never done before…writing normal people…[They] are achingly good-looking and some of the smartest people in the world and they speak in lines, but they are not mythic. They have childhoods and stunted or truncated adulthoods" (par. 12). Regarding Alicia and Bobby, he argues "I found her [Alicia] not totally unconvincing, and more convincing than Bobby, who remains a sort of metaphysical Marlboro man" (par. 11). Similarly, Peggy Ellsberg, for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, argues: "To write…his new novel…McCarthy had to command…enough math to make its main female character, Alicia Western, convincing as a world-class mathematician. Beyond a doubt, McCarthy is very, very "good" at it" (par. 1). As noted earlier, Thomas J Millay, for the same publication, argues: "What attracts us is the portrait of a genius that McCarthy convincingly constructs. What repels us is the pomposity that

accompanies a true believer" (par. 6). It would seem the novel, even by James Wood's criterion, does stand in its portrayal of Alicia, the mathematician genius, which was more of a concern for him than the portrayal of Bobby, who is not a genius like Alicia, and is aware about his sister's superior intelligence. And finally, although James Wood makes the claim that "these are novels about mathematicians, and they stand or fall on their ability to make Bobby and Alicia plausible as such" (par. 15), one only has to recognize that the only mathematician character in these novels is Alicia to see Wood's criterion of judgment fall apart. So Graeme Wood's reading of the novel where he discusses the role of Sheddan, a character without academic background in mathematics or science, contrasts with James Wood's reading. And regarding Alicia's portrayal, Graeme Wood argues: "Critics who have doubted McCarthy's ability to write a female character must acknowledge that she is as idiosyncratically fucked-up as any of the protagonists in his previous oeuvre" (par. 14). Here, Graeme Wood also addresses the previous criticisms regarding McCarthy's writing of female characters in his novels.

Another point of criticism regarding McCarthy's writing has been his style, and his dislike of punctuation marks. He never uses semi-colons, or quotation marks for dialogues, and also refrains from using apostrophes and commas as much as he can. Sullivan argues: "He told Oprah in a 2008 interview that he does not like semicolons and quotation marks either. They clutter. Too many "weird little marks." But the problem with clutter is distraction. And what is distracting are words that lack punctuation where ordinarily there would be some" (par. 9). For readers like Sullivan, McCarthy's aesthetic choice can obtrude on their reading experience. However, other readers, like Graeme Wood have attempted to interpret the novelist's choice in a productive way: "his text looks denuded and desertlike, with the remaining punctuation

sprouting intermittently, like creosote bushes" (par. 4). The sparse punctuation marks is a conscious choice by the author that gives his texts a distinctive look.

Sullivan also characterizes the prose style of the author as "portentous", by which he means to bring both the strength and weakness of McCarthy's style into focus (par. 2). "'Portentous,' according to Webster's, can mean foreboding, 'eliciting amazement' and 'being a grave or serious matter.' But it can also mean 'self-consciously solemn' and 'ponderously excessive'" (par. 2). When at its best, McCarthy's prose, that in the "aflatus" mode as James Wood calls it in his essay (par. 1), can heighten the intensity of what's being said, but at its worst, it can feel like an affectation. For Sullivan, in these novels, Cormac McCarthy's style is more like the latter definitions of 'portentous' than the former. But this can only apply to *The Passenger*, since the style here being described pertains to the McCarthy's third-person narration, and *Stella Maris* is composed fully of dialogues without any narratorial intrusions.

Regarding McCarthy's narratorial voice, Graeme Wood reasons that in his previous novels the omniscient narrator had the "voice of a merciless God…a deranged psycho who not only tolerates his world's atrocities but conceives of them in these strange and inhuman terms" (par. 5). But in the novels under discussion:

> The booming, omnipotent narrative voice…has ebbed almost entirely…perhaps like the voice of Yahweh himself, as he transitioned from interventionist to absentee in the Old Testament. What remain are human voices…characters, contending with one another and with their own fears and regrets, as they face the prospect of the godless void that awaits them. The result is heavy but pleasurable, and together the books are the richest and strongest work of McCarthy's career. (par. 7)

Unlike most critics, Graeme Wood seems to consider the duology to be up there with the best of McCarthy's works. In fact, he declares that "combined" these novels "an achievement greater than *Blood Meridian*, his best earlier work, or *The Road*, his best recent one" (par. 21). This seems to follow from two crucial contexts which inform Graeme Wood's reading of these novels. First, McCarthy's age: "An almost-nonagenarian will of course think more acutely than a younger writer about fading from existence" (par. 22). He considers McCarthy's age as a significant cause of his acuteness. Second, is the 'combined' effect of the two novels, which is missed by critics who focus more on *The Passenger* and consider *Stella Maris* to be only an appendix to the former.

For Graeme Wood, the duology is McCarthy's most direct engagement with the question: "What does a mortal do when all that matters is in the hands of the gods, or, in their absence, no one's?" (par. 22). In fact, the previously cited quote where McCarthy says "its more important to be good than to be smart" is a response to the interviewer asking him if the God his character "questions and curses" in *The Road* isthe same as the God that he grew up with in his childhood (Jurgensen par. 23). "That's all I can offer you", he finishes (par. 23). The duology, then, consists of McCarthy's most direct explorations of the ethical in lives led under a godless world. Peggy Ellsberg, another in a minority who consider the duology a "masterpiece" (par. 1), argues "Bobby and Alicia could find no one but each other for authentic companionship, yet their love never seems creepy. It burns with a hard flame that is never physically consummated. "We can do whatever we want," says Alicia. "No […] we cant," Bobby corrects" (par. 5). This exchange between Bobby and Alicia, I think, gets at the core of the duology's concerns: what is permissible, what is not?

The philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein can illuminate our way into these questions, not only of the what is permissible or morally right, but also of the status of language and words in the novel, which James Wood and Howard Gardner suppose to have been derided. In an obituary titled "The Cormac McCarthy I Know" published in *Nautilus*, the home journal of SFI, its president David Krakaeur notes:

> There are very few people who receive more careful attention from Cormac than Ludwig Wittgenstein. In addition to Wittgenstein's insights into language and meaning and his compressive style, Cormac told me how "everything that [Wittgenstein] thought about had to do with whether it was right or wrong and he worried about it constantly," and "if philosophy is not concerned with the way one should live what the hell is it concerned with?" (par. 13)

Therefore, to achieve a clarity regarding how the novels treat the concept of language, mathematics, intelligence and the limits to human knowledge and understanding as posed by the mathematicians and physicists of the twentieth century, as well as the human problem of how one ought to lead one's life, Wittgenstein might prove a useful entryway: in his philosophy, these are issues that are not separate, but inextricably entwined. An important question to ask would be: in what ways are Alicia and Bobbby different in their approach to life?

Lydia Cooper argues that *Stella Maris* is "an extended analysis of the language of mathematics and the vernacular that humans use to communicate with each other, both languages' attempts at bridging the distance between the animal subconscious and the prefrontal cortex, and between the individual brain and the world beyond". Instead of reading the novels as a derision of spoken language and glorification of mathematical language, Cooper sees in the novel an attempt to bring them in relation with respect to human capacities and limits: of

understanding the world or of conceiving reality. This reading facilitates bringing in Wittgensteinian perspectives on language to bear upon the novels. Since Wittgenstein's philosophy concerns itself with language, knowledge, as well as morality, and the novelist himself proclaims to be his "fan", not only of his content and style, but also of the way he led his life, it is almost as if his philosophy is key for understanding these novels.

This connection has been recognized by a few critics. James Wood says of Alicia that she "belongs to that tradition of Wittgensteinian geniuses who find regular ratiocination far too easy, quickly exhaust all available formulas, and spend the rest of their troubled lives brilliantly picketing the gates of their official disciplines" (par. 9). He sees in Alicia a Wittgensteinian quality, but does not explore this relation in more detail, which is to be expected since he is not writing a scholarly research paper but a newspaper article. Similarly, Jonathan Clarke notes that these novels "contemplate the tragic limits of our understanding" (par. 23). Anyone who has heard of Wittgenstein knows of the famous dictum: "the *limits of my language* mean the limits of my world" (*Tractatus*5.6). If Cooper's insight regarding the treatment of language, both mathematical and verbal, is combined with the theme of "limits" as recognized by Jonathan Clarke, a Wittgensteinian reading seems to follow.

Bryan Giemza, in his book-lenghth work of scholarship on Cormac McCarthy's writing titled *Science and Literature in Cormac McCarthy's Expanding Worlds*, does make some references to Wittgenstein's philosophy, via an essay titled "Quantum Wittgenstein" by Timothy Andersen, while discussing the duology (a word that I have taken from him). He reads the novels alongside debates about simulation theory, which can be summarized as a philosophy of extreme skepticism that hypothesizes the perceived reality as a simulation, similar to the brain-in-a-vat problem. Alicia had had an epiphany when she read the philosopher Berkley at the age of 12, and

Berkley is of course famous for claiming that matter does not exist and it is our minds that create the world. Giemza argues, "The problem with simulation theory is, in a sense, Wittgenstein's anticipated problem with simulation theory, and McCarthy's problem with language: it is merely secondary description of what appears to exist, not just metaphysically unreliable, but calling into question any metaphysic" (150). What Giemza seems to be getting at is that simulation theory cannot claim to be a precondition for reality, because for all one knows, reality is the precodnition for simulation theory. Wittgenstein thought philosophers could make no discoveries, but only make clear what is already self-evident. Wittgenstein famously compared philosophy to therapy. Andersen argues: "philosophy itself can discover nothing. It is simply a form of therapy that can quickly become a disease of the intellect. Its only job is to remind us of that which we already know" (par. 32). Therefore, simulation theory, which is a philosophy that makes a claim to discovery, would be problematic to Wittgenstein, as Giemza states. Andersen also claims: "What Wittgenstein understood is that you cannot use words to explain representation, because words are representations themselves. It would be like trying to travel outside the Universe to show somebody what the Universe is – a feat that's both impossible and unnecessary" (par. 25). Simulation theory is something akin to traveling outside the Universe to show somebody what the Universe is. Alicia too is intimate with such problems: "Wittgenstein was fond of saying that nothing can be its own explanation. I'm not sure how far that is from saying that things ultimately contain no information concerning themselves. But it may be true that you have to be on the outside looking in" (*Stella Maris* 67-68).

Now, regarding 'McCarthy's problem with language', it is important to note that only Giemza seems to make the connection between the duology and McCarthy's first and only piece of published non-fiction, a 2017 essay titled "The Kekule Problem", where he defines the

unconscious as a "machine for operating an animal" (par. 3), more biological than psychological. In the essay, McCarthy claims that the unconscious distrusts language and therefore speaks to us in dreams via images rather than straight-forward language. The reason he hypothesizes is that the unconscious is older than language, so distrusts it. " The unconscious is just not used to giving verbal instructions and is not happy doing so. Habits of two million years duration are hard to break" (par. 24). Giemza claims that in the duology, the Thalidomide Kid, the central figure that Alicia sees, is an allegory for the voice for the unconscious, and might actually hold key regarding the world outside of language. "The duology of McCarthy's final works dramatizes through the persistent harangues of the Kid that the unconscious might be the porter to this kingdom beyond the cloud of unknowing—even though we swat it away, deriding its 'antics' and 'primitive understanding.'" (149). The cloud of unknowing refers to the hiddenness of what it is that the world, if it is a simulation, is being coded towards. In a sense, it suggests the unprdictability of the future, but also a sense in which the future shapes the present, harkening back to the science of complexity and emergence that forms the central lens through which Bryan Giemza reads McCarthy's novels. Therefore, Giemza does not fully work out how Wittgenstein, or his philosophy of language, might figure in the duology, but nonetheless, gives us vital entrypoints.

In the literature that has been reviewed, there is a noticeable absence of discussion concerning Dr. Cohen's role in *Stella Maris*. Graeme Wood claims that "*Stella Maris* is really an extended monologue, her shrink's contribution little more than comically minimal prompts" (par. 14). Graeme Wood does not consider Dr. Cohen to be of particular importance. However, this thesis investigates Dr. Cohen as a significant character in *Stella Maris*. Furthermore, Wood does recognize that in the absence of the third-person point of view, "What remain are human voices,

which is to say characters, contending with one another and with their own fears and regrets, as they face the prospect of the godless void that awaits them" (par. 7). Although his remark concerns *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris* both, the effects of a 'godless void' are more emphasized in the latter.

Similarly, Millay, in his review, claims that Alicia's failure to act is a consequence of her love for her brother Bobby. "Alicia...knows and believes that comprehending the world via mathematics is not the whole point of existence. And, knowing this, she wants to act. But she cannot: she is prevented. And what prevents her? The fact that the act she wishes to undertake is love, and the love is for her brother" (par. 10). Millay misses seeing Alicia's self-admission into *Stella Maris* and her agreement to chat with a psychiatrist as acts. Furthermore, Alicia expresses her desire for action multiple times during the dialogues, but what prevents her is the very clinical setting she admitted herself into, and Dr. Cohen, with whom she has agreed to chat. For instance, she demands that if Cohen wants to hear about the life in her dreams, both of them need to "leave the room and come back in different clothes" (*Stella Maris* 128). Cohen even asks her what she would wear, but after she answers and asks him the same, he does not answer, instead responding with another question concerning her dreams. Given his past issues with infidelity, Cohen might have been made nervous by Alicia, thereby not seeing her invitation for a genuine relationship as anything other than having sexual implications. Furthermore, the dictates of psychiatry and psychology confine Cohen as well. Therefore, Alicia's restriction needs to be understood in relation to her location in a mental facility and her interlocutor's attitude towards her.

Shane Trudell, in his essay "Antipsychiatry and Depathologization in Cormac McCarthy's *Stella Maris*," discusses the novel's implications for psychiatry, psychology, and

other such disciplines, which he calls "psy-disciplines" (par. 5). He interprets the novel's claim as one for nonpathologization, stating, "it is inappropriate and cruel to malign, scold, shame, and punish those of us who are having troubles in our psycho-emotional lives" (par. 8). For Trudell, Alicia's criticism concerns how the psydisciplines assume a judging attitude towards the patients. Alicia is criticizing the pathologization of patients, their being subjected to baseless categories. However, Trudell believes that what helps is believing "in the massive varieties of human experience, and in the ethical, functional, and ontological necessity of taking seriously our experiences for a good long while before we really decide to throw them into the camp of madness, psychosis, or even neurosis" (par. 12). Although Trudell is right in considering the attitude that the psy-disciplines have assumed towards the patient by their pathologization as degrading, by insisting on certain knowledge that can be received from one's own experience, he still assumes that the problem of treating mental patients concerns a total knowledge of them, which can be interpreted as an assumption of objectivity.

This thesis claims that the complex text of *Stella Maris* should be understood as an ethical exploration of the tension between the subjective and the objective claims for the world, conducted by absenting the third-person point of view from the text, as a consequence of which, there is no God-like perspective that could fix the subjective and the objective in place. Instead, the two principal characters inhabit a hypothetical world, that can be shared only in their agreements and disagreements, bringing to the fore intersubjective relationships as the basis of the world. Similarly, the character of Alicia needs to be understood as struggling against objectification on two fronts: first, against Dr. Cohen, who by withholding his judgment, assumes the position of a detached knower with respect to her, thereby treating her like an object to be known, rather than an ensouled being who needs to be responded to; and second, against

the objectification of the world through epistemologies and ontologies that claim its independence from the mind. In the former case, her struggle manifests in her attempts to strike a genuine conversation with Dr Cohen, that can, given Alicia's acknowledgement of her friendless condition, be understood as an aspiration towards friendship. In the latter case, her struggle manifests as a radical scepticism which affirms nothing but the soul, and the claim made upon it by evil. This also explains her ambivalence regarding morality of mathematics, an activity which is inherently solitary and whose end result aspires towards an independence from the mind, and her idealisation of music, an activity that can elicit a unique response from human bodies, that without language or logic, can draw their attention towards each other. For further research, the similarites and differences in McCarthy's and Kafka's symbol of the violin, using it to question the boundaries of what it means to be human and who can or cannot partake in that category, needs to be explored.

Similarly, the two principal figures of Alicia's mental illness, the Archatron and the Thalidomide Kid, can be understood as symbolic of the running tension between the objective and the intersubjective. The former as the evil maker of the objective world who has a claim upon Alicia's soul, that is, has the power to leave her soulless, while the latter as an affirmation of an intersubjective experience, and an attempt to acknowledge the human soul. However, as Alicia puts it: "a friend must be someone you can touch" (171). Ultimately, it falls upon Dr Cohen, to either acknowledge Alicia or avoid her. Here, it should not be understood that Alicia is wishing she had met Dr. Cohen outside the clinical setting—a misunderstanding that Dr. Cohen himself makes when he assumes she is flirting with him. A study of McCarthy's use of the phrase "someplace else" in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, though not conducted here, could further illuminate this point.

This thesis undertakes to study Alicia's criticism of the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and others concerned with the well-being of mental patients, as a demand for reform articulated from the same setting she is critical of. Therefore, it is pertinent to explore why it could be that Alicia, despite being so critical of the clinical setting, agrees to come in for a "chat" in that very setting she's so critical of (5). This can be made clear if by paying close attention to the start of their conversation:

Hi. I'm Dr Cohen.

You're not the Dr Cohen I was expecting.

Sorry about that. That would be Dr Robert Cohen.

Yes. I guess there's no shortage of Dr Cohens. (*Stella Maris* 5)

One might here hypothesise that Alicia agrees to a 'chat' in the clinical setting despite her being so critical of it because of a personal relationship she had with 'Dr Robert Cohen'. Since she recognizes that the Dr Cohen in front of her is not the Dr Cohen she expected to meet just by looking, one might assume that she has met this 'Dr Robert Cohen', or at least seen a picture of him. However, since the name is not mentioned afterwards, one cannot be entirely sure that the person was that important to Alicia. Her response to the situation is one of speculation: "I guess there's no shortage of Dr Cohens" (5). She does not hesitate to speculate that Dr Cohens are commonplace. This is not a speculation one makes about the name of someone one has a close relationship with, close enough to make a concession like the one Alicia makes to her scepticism of the clinical setting, when she agrees to "chat" in that setting. Furthermore, she still agrees to have a conversation with Dr Cohen, despite him not being who she expected him to be. Therefore, the hypothesis is invalid.

An alternative presents itself by diverting focus from the person that 'Robert Cohen'

named, to the name itself. Robert is also the name of Alicia's brother, with whom, as it will be later revealed, she is desperately in love with. Her brother Robert Western, called Bobby by those who know him, is in a coma at the time of this conversation. In fact, it is after she could not bring herself to sign the papers which would allow the doctors "to pull the plug" on Bobby that Alicia escapes Italy, where Bobby is, and admits herself into the titular Stella Maris (*Stella Maris* 7). She also tells Cohen that she does not want to talk about her brother.

One could then argue that she agreed to meet Dr Cohen despite her scepticism because of what the name 'Robert' signified for her. However, the problem still remain, that she agrees to the conversation even after finding out that the person in front of her is named otherwise. Furthermore, in speaking about what the name 'Robert Cohen' could have signified for Alicia, the assumption is that this signification is a private mental act, that only she can know what it signifies to her. It leads to a dead-end. Here, one assumes the position of a sceptic with respect to the problem of other minds, that is, from the fact that one cannot have another person's experience, it follows that the knowledge concerning another's experience is denied to that one. However, what is also being assumed is that such a knowledge is possible, but is possessed only by the person in question, and in the present case, that person is Alicia.

What are famously called Wittgenstein's Private Language Arguments, abbreviated as PLAs, show that there cannot be a language whose words "refer to what only the speaker can know…so another person cannot understand the language" (*Philosophical Investigations* 95). In order to demonstrate this, Wittgenstein constructs different thought experiments, one of which is referred to as "the beetle-in-a box" argument (*Philosophical Investigations* 106-107). However, before studying Wittgenstein's argument here, it is necessary to be familiar with the context in which he is devising the thought-experiment.

Throughout *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein battles with what he calls the Augustinian picture of language in this way: "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (*Philosophical Investigations* 5). His attacks are against the picture which views the meaning of a word as the object which it refers to. This picture makes "clear vision impossible" when used to describe the "working of language" (Wittgenstein 7). Instead, he proposes that meaning of a word is best described by its use. "For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word "meaning" – though not for *all* –this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (*Philosophical Investigations* 25). The meaning of words cannot be studied apart from what use is made of them.

However, it should not be construed that words and their meanings exist independently of each other, in an arbitrary relation, which is then held together by use. The concept of "use" should not be understood as providing a theory of language, which explains language for all possible cases. Instead, each use is situated–it is particular. According to Toril Moi, "Use is not a ground. Use is a practice grounded on nothing. Use is simply what we do. Nothing—no essences, no built-in referential power— obliges us to continue using language as we do now" (Moi 29). In other words, use does not explain language, it only describes it for a particular instance.

So Wittgenstein sees in the question "What is a word really?" an analogy with the question "What is a piece in chess?" (*Philosophical Investigations* 52). Saying that a piece in chess is something used to play chess would be akin to saying nothing at all about the piece. Wittgenstein explains, "When one shows someone the king in chess and says "This is the king", one does not thereby explain to him the use of this piece– unless he already knows the rules of

the game except for this last point: the shape of the king" (*Philosophical Investigations* 18). A person cannot be taught how to play a game of chess only by giving him the names of the pieces in a chess-board. The chess-pieces do not refer to, nor signify, anything by themselves. Rather, their definitions, that is, their meaning, is a description of how they are used.

Similarly, "we cannot understand a word or an utterance unless we understand the practice it is a part of" (Moi 44). To understand the meaning of the word 'offside', I need to understand how a game of football is played, and what its rules are. To understand the meaning of the word 'dhyappa', I need to understand how a game of lukamari is played, and what its rules are. Likewise, to understand what is the meaning of the word 'promise, I need to understand the human practice of making promises, as well as breaking them. Wittgenstein's concept of "language-game" brings this similarity between games and language into view in order to emphasise how interwoven actions and words are (*Philosophical Investigations* 8). The point is not to explain language-use, but to describe it.

Wittgenstein's "beetle-in-a-box" thought experiment occurs in a discussion of the language-game of "pain" (*PI* 106). In what is called an 'argument from analogy' the philosophical problem of other minds is resolved by making one's own experience the grounds from which a knowledge about another's is secured. In other words, by referring to my own mental experience of pain, and the way I behaved then, I can know that someone else, who too is exhibiting the same behaviour, is in pain. Here, "pain" refers to a mental object inside my head, and which expresses itself through "pain-behaviour". However, Wittgenstein wants to prove that in the language-game of "pain", that is, to form a description of the practice that it is a part of, the mental object that the "pain" refers to is irrelevant. For him, "argument by analogy" is a case

of generalising "irresponsibly" (*Philosophical Investigations* 106). The moral implications of Wittgenstein's argument can be explored after a brief summary of the thought-experiment.

> Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle". No one can ever look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing–But what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless? –If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box does not belong to the language-game at all; not even as a *Something*: for the box might even be empty. –No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.
>
> That is to say, if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name', the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant. (*PI* 106-107)

Wittgenstein begins by hypothesising a world where everyone has a box, and inside that box is a thing called a 'beetle'. However, nobody is allowed to see what's inside another's box, all they know about the thing inside the box is by looking at their own boxes. So, for one, the thing called 'beetle' might be what we would call a 'cockroach', while for another, the thing called 'beetle' might be what we would call 'nothing'. Therefore, a true understanding of the word 'beetle' in this language-game requires a description of how that word is used in practice by the people, with what activities is it interwoven, and not a description of the thing inside the box. The act of using 'beetle' in a sentence, uttering it, is learned by a child not by looking inside the thing in the box, but by looking at other human beings, how they use the word, and in what circumstances. If they utter the word 'beetle' everytime a guest leaves the house, then he will

learn to do so as well. Here, knowledge about the thing inside the box is irrelevant to understanding the practice that the word is a part of. Similarly, to be able to use the piece of king in chess, it is irrelevant whether I know how the word "king" came to name that piece. That knowledge could be of use to me in some other practice, but would not make me necessarily a better chess player than someone else who had no notion of what a 'king of the country' means. Instead, he might come to know about the meaning of 'king of the country' by knowing what a 'king' means in the game of chess.

The 'argument by analogy' is irresponsible in its generalisation, because it assumes that 'pain-behaviour' is the same for everyone. For instance, it assumes that an adult, whose pain had not been attended to in his childhood, will have the same"pain-behaviour" as the one, whose pain had been attended to. This makes clear the ethical implications of Wittgenstein's argument. The issue of pain in particular, and the problem of other minds in general, is not about what 'pain' refers to, or what knowledge about the experience of another mind can be secured, rather it requires a description of what activities the utterance of the word 'pain' is interwoven with, including those activities where it might not at all be uttered but sensed, and similarly, for the problem of other minds, a description of what activities the utterance of the word "mind" is interwoven with, including those activities where it might not at all be uttered but sensed. By sensed, I mean cases where the meaning of the language-game enters without an utterance of that specific word. For example, the referee does not utter 'Offside!', but rather only raises his flag, but the meaning enters nonetheless.

Now, returning to Alicia's case, first, that there is a doctor named "Robert Cohen" does not explain why Alicia had "agreed to chat" with him (*Stella Maris* 5). Second, the idea that the name, and its power to override her scepticism of psychiatry or therapy, signifies her love for

Bobby, assumes a private mental act, which can lead the study nowhere, and also leaves it unexplained why she does not revoke the agreement the moment she finds out that the one in front of him is not named Robert Cohen. Wittgenstein's method can be brought to bear on the case by closely studying the two chances she gets at revoking the agreement at the beginning of their conversation. Instead of revoking the prior agreement, she can be said to have renewed it here.

You're going to record this.

I think that was the agreement. Is that alright?

I suppose. At the time I thought you were somebody else.

It's not alright.

No. It's okay. Although I should say that I only agreed to chat. (5)

The first thing to notice here is that in the absence of the third-person narrator's point of view, the world can only come to be defined by the utterances of Alicia and Cohen. In a manner, their utterances bring the world into being. However, they do not bring this world into being by describing things. Their utterances, here, are not descriptive. In the first utterance by Alicia, no tape-recorder is mentioned, the readers are not given a view of what Alicia is seeing, instead she mentions only the act of recording. This is suggestive of Wittgenstein's proposition that the world "is the totality of facts, not of things" (*Tractatus* 1.1). However, in her utterance, Alicia is not registering a fact either. Instead, Alicia's utterance can be read as registering a hypothesis, or making a prediction–it is not yet made fact, it is not yet of the world, her world. Therefore, her utterance is also a pointing at the limits of her world: "*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world" (*Tractatus*5.6). If it was a fact in her world, there would be no hypothesis about it, no utterance. However, it is a fact in Cohen's world, but Alicia's registering of it, as it enters

intoher world, as a hypothesis, has set it in doubt, and in need of a test. Here, speaking of her world, and his world, instead of being an assumption of an inner mental life, needs to be understood as being the sense of their utterances. The speculative language used here is indicative of Alicia's remark that "reality" is "at best" a "collective hunch" (*Stella Maris* 48). Alicia and Cohen are to be understood as playing the language-game of hypothesising from their own situatedness, and in their agreement, bringing a resultant world into being.

Therefore, Cohen responds by pointing at an "agreement" but in a speculative manner, as if what he's pointing to, might not be there at all. Therefore, he asks her for a reconfirmation, which would mean a renewal of a prior agreement, from which it would follow that the present hypothesis is a correct one. If he does not get this confirmation, then the agreement cannot be said to exist at all, since the subject of the hypothesis is the world. Cohen is testing if they can reach an agreement on how they suppose the world to be, and whether the fact of recording can be a part of their supposition, by invoking a prior agreement, but an agreement whose existence he is no longer certain of.

Alicia responds with the phrase "I suppose" which is a confirmation, but with some doubt still. In other words, she's not entirely sure about her agreeing to this. She had "thought" Cohen to be "somebody else" when she had made the agreement. In other words, she had supposed Cohen to be somebody else, when she had made the agreement. The situation is not too dissimilar from a student's, who expects one sort of answer on her first glance at the problem, but gets a different one after working it out in practice. The student will have doubts about this answer. She will perhaps go over each step in her solution to see if she made an invalid move somewhere. One could argue that Alicia, in pointing it out, sees assuming Cohen to be "somebody else" as the invalid move, and therefore, discredits the solution. This is how Cohen

interprets it as well when he says, “It’s not alright” (5). However, supposing a variable to be something, that when working out, becomes something else, is a normal procedure in the solving of problems. Therefore, Alicia’s “I suppose” can be read as her supposing the present condition she finds herself in, that she is being recorded by a different Dr Cohen than she had expected, to be the case moving forwards. It is now a fact in her world. She is agreeing to renew the terms of the prior agreement. Alicia’s supposition, then, only functioned as a starting point.

This can help us explain why Alicia does not revoke her agreement even after she finds out that the person in front of her is not who she thought he was. It is because she had only “supposed” him to be otherwise, and the overtones of a mathematical language here are suggestive. “Mathematics is ultimately a faith-based initiative. And faith is an uncertain business” (*Stella Mari*s 66). When one supposes something to be the case, one is putting faith not in its being so, but one’s ability to make suppositions at all, which is expressed by that person’s act of supposing. If the ability to make supposition remains unexpressed, that is, if one cannot suppose at all, then the ability will be in question, as well as faith. Therefore, Alicia calls “faith” an uncertain business.

Similarly, when asked if the figures she sees come with names, Alicia responds “Nobody comes with names. You give them names so that you can find them in the dark” (15). It is this ‘dark’ and not the ‘names’ which imperils the endeavour of finding something worthy enough to be named at all. Wittgenstein calls naming “the preparation for a use of a word” (*Philosophical Investigations* 16). Alicia can be said to have lovingly named something she found in the dark “Robert Cohen” as a preparation to use it. Imagine a mathematician, in solving a problem of the kind where convention dictates that the variable be named either ‘x’ or ‘y’ or ‘z,’ instead names the variable ‘*r*’ because she’s in love with a boy, the first letter of whose name begins with that

letter. It is relevant to the case only in the sense that it affects her spirit. It could distract her from the problem, but just as well motivate her. However, it does not affect the solution simply by itself.

Alicia, at the beginning of the conversation, is to be understood as already having had faith, however, not as an inner mental act, but as is expressed by the initiative she takes. Furthermore, Alicia considers "faith" the "one indispensable gift" (*Stella Maris* 98). Here, again, faith comes about through an act of gifting, and should not be taken as an inner mental act. First, one cannot gift oneself. Second, neither can one gift to another by simple mental exertion. Wittgenstein explains it thus:

> Why cannot my right hand give my left hand money? –My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift, and my left hand a receipt. –But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. When the left hand has taken the money from the right, and so forth, one will ask, "Well, and now what?". (*Philosophical Investigations*101)

Finally, it can be concluded that if Alicia had actually opted out of the conversation, which was reached about through a faith-based initiative, just because her expectations regarding the name had turned out to be false, it would indicate that she had faith in the name. However, she does not. Therefore, to say that she had faith in the name would be an error, but the error would still persist in the negation, that she did not have faith in the name, because without the act of naming, the faith would not have been expressed at all, which is to say, Alicia could not be said to be in possession of faith in the first place. Instead, the name "Robert Cohen" should be understood as a move enabled by Alicia's having had "faith", but this "faith" is not a mental entity possessed by her apart from this act. In other words, in her action, she embodies faith.

Alicia was born on Boxing Day, "the day you exchange gifts" (*Stella Maris*63). If faith is a gift, it could as well be received by one from an action of another, without that another knowing that it is a gift. One speaks of another's action as having restored one's faith in humanity. It needs to be perceived as such by the receiver. However, as Alicia remarks, "Some gifts are unwelcome" (150). An act, for it to be called gifting, requires the recognition of it as such on the part of the receiver. Therefore, "faith", when it is used in the language-game of gifting, is still an "uncertain business".

When asked if did not seem "odd" to her that her father, a physicist who had the credentials of being a part of the Manhattan Project, went to "quack doctors" in order to be treated of pancreatic cancer, Alicia affirms that it did, but adds, "If there was a fault in his reasoning it was that he was too well informed to actually put much faith in the curative powers of apricots. And the only chance for it to work would have been if he could" (*Stella Maris*115). Here, one could understand Alicia as saying that if there was a chance that her father could survive, it would be through faith. However, it would then also be correct to say that it was faith that killed him. To avoid contradiction, one needs to pay close attention to how Alicia is using the word "faith". Her utterance implies that her father had something called "faith", say pieces in a game, only he 'could not' put much of it in the "curative powers of apricots", which one can imagine as boxes in a game like that of langur burja, and one's being dead or alive is the stake. Therefore, it ultimately comes down to "chance", there's an air of uncertainty. There are parallels in Alicia's case, namely that they both suffer from an illness and are sceptical of a kind of treatment they receive, but the distinctions are as significant.

First, Alicia's illness is mental, while her father's was physical. Alicia draws a distinction between mental and physical illness in the following statement: "Mental illness differs from

physical illness in that the subject of mental illness is always and solely information" (30). In other words, it is not the mental patient's brain that hurts if one is to understand her as being in pain due to the illness. Rather, the subject of mental illness is the mental patient's outlook on the world, a picture of which cannot be drawn without bringing the world to bear upon it. The truth of the patient's condition cannot come solely from the patient's mind, rather the response to the patients, whether it be confining them in regulated spaces, treating them as objects of knowledge, or treating them as gods, is as much a part of the picture as is the patient herself. One could argue here, that similar to physical illness, mental illness could be ascribed to a malfunctioning of an organ, namely the brain, which would also fulfill the requirement of bringing the world to bear upon the picture that is drawn, rather than looking at the mind solely. However, Alicia makes the following point: "If a psychosis was just some synapses misfiring why wouldnt you simply get static? But you dont. You get a carefully crafted and fairly articulate world never seen before" (51). Here, Alicia is asking, why is it that the brain, instead of going dead, instead produces a clearly delineated world, not unlike anyone else's? Just because the outlook mental patients have on the world is different, does not mean that whatever is different in their brain, should be classified as a disorder, and in need of repair. "It's just that those people who entertain a mental life at odds with that of the general population should be pronounced ipsofuckingfacto mentally ill and in need of medication is ludicrous on the face of it" (30). Instead, their outlook is as valid a claim upon the world, as is anyone else's. In fact, great truth concerning the world comes through such testimonies. It is the response to their outlook, that is, how it is received in the world, that ultimately decides the truth of the situation, whether to call it a gift or not. Similar arguments could be made regarding physical deformities as well, however, the subject here would not be solely information.

Second, Alicia has put her "faith" in the curative powers of "chat" with another human being, while her father was required to put it in the curative powers of apricots, and could not. Therefore, it is now the responsibility of Cohen, through his actions, to acknowledge Alicia's faith, keep the agreement intact, by making a move away from "therapy", however, not too far, since the distinction between "chat" and "therapy" is a blurry one. However, it should here be explained why Alicia disapproves of therapy, in what way does she disagree with it, before looking at the problem of knowledge and acknowledgement. This can be made clear by a close reading of the following exchange that occurs just before the renewal of agreement, and after the introduction:

> How are you? Are you all right?
>
> Am I all right.
>
> Yes.
>
> I am in the looney bin.
>
> Well. Other than that, I suppose.
>
> How long have you been doing this? (*Stella Maris*5)

Here, Cohen begins with a question, but Alicia registers it as an invalid proposition, rather than as a hypothesis or a prediction. A proposition is a general statement that describes the world and can be assigned a truth-value. If what the proposition describes is a fact in the world, then it is true, if not, then it is false. Conversely, if what the proposition describes is true, then it is a fact in the world, if not, then it is not a fact in the world. However, a false proposition is as valid as a true one. For a proposition to be invalid, it needs to be illogical.

Therefore, Alicia's response "I am in the looney bin" should be read as a registering of a better proposition, received after a working out of the previous one. The problem with the

statement “Am I all right” is that it does not describe the world, Alicia’s relation in it, and therefore, cannot be considered a valid proposition, since it cannot be assigned any truth-value by setting it against the world. Again, “The world is everything that is the case…The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (*Tractatus*1, 1.1). Alicia’s response is a valid proposition that can be assigned a truth-value.

Next, Cohen asks Alicia if she’s alright other than the fact of her being in a looney bin. To this, Alicia responds with scepticism, which is expressed by her asking Dr Cohen how long he had been practicing. At first, it might seem that Alicia is expressing doubt regarding Dr Cohen’s credentials as a psychiatrist. However, Alicia is to be understood as expressing doubt regarding Dr Cohen’s inexperience, that he was too experienced to be open to new ways of treating mental illness.

Therefore, Alicia’s act of registering Cohen’s question as an invalid proposition, and then working it out into a valid one, should be understood as Alicia’s call to treat “mental illness” in a relational way. In other words, the true picture of Alicia’s situation cannot come solely from Alicia, but requires understanding her relation in the world. It is this understanding that therapy lacks, and in doing so, is a treatment she disagrees with, and a treatment that Cohen, however, is in agreement with, as evidenced by the following exchange.

> The therapist has to believe that the patient is the doctor. That she contains the truth regarding herself. What do you think?
> I suppose I would agree with that. (*Stella Maris* 124)

The exchange above occurs in a discussion of Alicia’s experience with a psychiatrist called ‘Dr Horowitz’ who put Alicia on “suicide watch” due to her “seeming obsession with death” (123). Alicia describes him as unforthcoming. “I think I just made him nervous. I’m not

sure what he thought. He was not all that forthcoming. Sometimes he would just sit and watch me" (123).

Both, Cohen and Horowitz, assume that the truth regarding the situation lies solely in the patient. In other words, their understanding of mental patients is objective, not relational; the therapist does not enter into the picture. This explains Horowitz's being unforthcoming. By assuming themselves to not be a part of the picture, Horowitz and Cohen are also assuming powerlessness regarding Alicia's situation, which the picture is of. Their objectivity reveals Horowitz and Cohen as sceptics as well, but of a different kind than Alicia. Their assumption that the patient alone knows the truth of their condition reveals them as sceptical of another mind, that is, sceptical about claims to knowledge regarding another mind. Using Stanley Cavell's formulation, the scepticism of another mind can be expressed by the assumption that "he alone knows what is going on in him" (*Claim of Reason* 352). In other words, Cohen supposes Alicia alone to know what is going on in her. The issue for him, one can say, is knowledge. This can be made more explicit by studying the following exchange where Cohen expresses doubt regarding Alicia's honesty.

> You have your doubts I take it.
>
> Well. I'm not tracking down facts so much as trying to see what you think.
>
> Are you just another Horowitz to me.
>
> I dont think that. The doubts I have would be mostly that if you were in trouble you might not be forthcoming about it.
>
> That's what Bobby used to say.
>
> Was he right?
>
> Yes. (124)

Here, Cohen denies that he has any doubts regarding Alicia's honesty by implying that it does not matter to him, if she's honest or not. He considers facts regarding the situation to be irrelevant. Instead, his desire is to "see" what she thinks. In doing so, however, what goes out of the picture is the world, and he along with it. His sole concern is knowledge regarding Alicia's mind.

Furthermore, he claims that he has doubts if Alicia would be forthcoming in case of any trouble. To this, Alicia could have again repeated her proposition, "I'm in the looney bin" (*Stella Maris*5). The fact that she's in a mental facility is enough trouble already. The fact that she admitted herself into the facility is as forthcoming as she can be. However, she agrees with Cohen, stating that her brother said the same thing to her.

To understand why Alicia agrees with Cohen here, the following remark by Wittgenstein will be of much help: "The truth is: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself" (*Philosophical Investigations* 96). In other words, knowledge of pain is solely the concern of the one who wants to know, but for the person who is in pain, what that one wants to know does not enter as knowledge at all, it is not something to doubt, and therefore, not something to be certain of. In Alicia's case, she has the habit of registering Cohen's utterances, when it enters her world, as hypotheses and propositions that stand against the world, they are something that can be doubted.

Illness, when it is understood as that of the mind, cannot be propositionized by the one who is ill, and made to stand against the world, since it cannot be doubted, and what cannot be doubted, cannot be ascertained either, it simply does not enter the world. "Wittgenstein was fond of saying that nothing can be its own explanation…that things ultimately contain no information concerning themselves…that you have to be on the outside looking in" (*Stella Maris* 67-68).

Mental illness, when it is understood as being solely in the person who is ill, cannot be assigned a truth-value, and is not a fact in the world for the patient, since the patient cannot get outside of the condition that she is in–it is not an object of knowledge for her. "I am my world" (*Tractatus*5.63). Alicia is her world. She cannot get outside it. This expresses Alicia's solipsism, a point that willbe explored later.

However, Alicia is not as committed to the *Tractatus* as this interpretation might make it seem. Elsewhere, unlike in the first instance, when she's asked if she's alright, she does give ordinary replies. Therefore, her agreement with Cohen, regarding the subject of her not being forthcoming, should also be seen as her realizing that the *Tractatus*view of the world is limited. However, the fact that this knowledge regarding her problems with being forthcoming enters through Bobby, still validates the fact that the truth of one's own condition, cannot be understood solely as mental, cannot come from one's own mind. It still needs to come through a relation, and this is what "chat" could mean for Alicia. In other words, only through an acknowledgement by Cohen, can her illness find meaning in the world. She cannot, by herself alone, know what her illness is.

Here, it is pertinent to discuss Stanley Cavell's arguments regarding the problem of other minds, beginning with his exploration of the first-person statement "I know I'm in pain", a statement that for Wittgenstein, can only be uttered as a "joke" (*Philosophical Investigations*96), when used to ascertain or doubt. For Cavell, the statement is indeed illogical when used to ascertain or doubt, however seen as an "acknowledgement" of pain, it becomes meaningful. Cavell's concept of "acknowledgement" is a powerful method to evaluate situations, such as that of Alicia and Cohen's, in which the subject is a knowledge regarding another's mind.

> As an acknowledgment (admission, confession) [the first-person statement] is perfectly intelligible [in contrast to the first-person statement being about knowledge, when it concerns something that one can doubt or ascertain]. It won't be one which is used very often, perhaps; it requires a context in which, for some reason, I wish to conceal my pain–say because to admit it would be shameful, or would look like an excuse–and the person to whom I say "I know I ..." here is trying to get me to admit it. (*Must We Mean* 256)

The statement "I know I'm in pain" becomes meaningful in contexts where the speaker is expressing exasperation with his condition, or in contexts where he is admitting to others that he is in pain after having denied it, say by trying to act like he was alright. Here, it should be noted that Alicia does not deny her pain, or act as if she's alright. Her utterance "I'm in the looney bin", and her act of self-admission at Stella Maris, can be read as an acknowledgement of her condition.

Furthermore, in the case that Cavell is describing, the word "know" is not being used in the sense that there could also be the possibility of the person in pain not knowing it, being ignorant of it. Instead, the word is used to acknowledge his pain, and his utterance is "an expression of pain, that is, an exhibiting of the *object* of knowledge" (259). This is how Cavell reconciles the sceptic's insight with his own. The sceptic "says that the other alone *knows*, not that the other alone *can acknowledge*" (246). Similar to how the person in pain, by his actions and utterances, can acknowledge his pain, if not know it, the sceptic too, can acknowledge the other's pain, if not know it. Here, the crucial step Cavell takes next is showing that acknowledgement is in no way a weaker alternative to knowledge.

> It isn't as if being in a position to acknowledge something is *weaker* than being in a position to know it. On the contrary: from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I'm late (which is what my words say); but from my knowing I am late, it doesn't follow that I acknowledge I'm late–otherwise, human relationships would be altogether other than they are. One could say: Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.) (*Must We Mean* 256-257)

Knowledge is not enough to express acknowledgement, but acknowledgement necessarily expresses knowledge, and goes beyond that, not by adding to the knowledge that it expresses, but by doing something about it, or by revealing something about it. By acknowledging that I'm late, I am revealing something about my knowledge of the fact that I'm late, I am revealing something about myself for others.

Cavell's treatment of the first-person half of the problem shifts the emphasis from knowledge to acknowledgement in our understanding of the problem of other minds. The first-person statement, rather than an ascertaining of pain, is an expression of it, and that is how the pain gets acknowledged. But the third-person statement "I know he's in pain" is not an expression pain, but can be understood as an acknowledgement of another's pain. This shows how closely related, yet different, are the two statements, and that they cannot be blanketed as a quest for certainty. It makes a different claim upon us, to whom it is said that "I know he's in pain." To clarify the matter, Cavell considers the second-person statement "I know you're in pain."

> I said that the reason "I know I am in pain" is not an expression of certainty is that it is an expression of pain–it is an exhibiting of the object about which someone (else) may be

> certain. I might say here that the reason "I know you are in pain" is not an expression of certainty is that it is a response to this exhibiting; it is an expression of *sympathy.* ("I know what you're going through"; "I've done all I can"; "The serum is being flown in by special plane.") (*Must We Mean* 263)

Acknowledging another's pain means responding to it. If I doubt that he is in pain, then that is my response, and sometimes that could be the right thing to do. In such a case, the knowledge regarding the other's pain, as it gets registered in the world, will not be registered without my act of doubt. In other cases, I might need to call an ambulance, or simply give him a glass of water, or talk with him, sympathise with him. Here, again, without my response, the knowledge of the pain does not get registered in the world as knowledge. Therefore, Cavell claims that it is only through acknowledgement that one can be said to possess any knowledge, when it concerns another mind, at all.

> But why is sympathy expressed in this way? Because your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer–I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what "(your or his) being in pain" means. Is. (*Must We Mean* 263)

In understanding acknowledgement as a significant aspect of the problem of other minds, the stress is on the ethical rather than on the epistemological, on the response to it rather than on the certain knowledge of it. For Cavell, knowledge regarding another mind cannot be registered in the world without it being responded to. By responding to it with an insistence on certainty, the responsibility of registering the pain as a fact in the world gets deferred, is deflected. With this insight, one can interpret Cohen asking Alicia to tell him "a little about" herself (McCarthy

6), as a deflection of response, and an insistence on certainty, since he already knows a lot about Alicia from the files he has on her. He does not respond to the knowledge he already has, but rather insists on certainty. The following exchange provides an example:

> There's a note in your files to the effect that you felt you were decaying. I think that's the word you used. Do you remember making such a statement? It sounds like a rather classical somatic delusion. Something out of the literature. Or were you just stringing your keepers along?
>
> Maybe I was just bored.
>
> Well. People get bored.
>
> No they dont.
>
> They dont?
>
> No. They've no idea what boredom is.
>
> Well. I'll take your word for it. (*Stella Maris* 25)

Here, Cohen already has the knowledge of Alicia expressing it elsewhere that she feels as if she were "decaying". The statement can be taken as Alicia expressing that she's in pain. Instead of responding to it, however, he insists on certainty. Alicia's remarks about boredom can be seen as her merely being a contrarian. However, it needs to be understood as her being frustrated that someone else does not recognize her expression of pain, and rather demands an explanation for it. As Cavell says, "if…others do not know what crying out (in pain) means, then adding the words about pain will hardly be expected to help" (*Claim of Reason* 337). In a scenario where one expresses pain by, say, crying, and others do not understand this expression as pain, then perhaps that one will cry harder, but if crying as an expression of pain is incomprehensible to others, then an explanation regarding that expression will not help–it would

almost be absurd. Furthermore, Cohen acquiescing to Alicia's frustration by saying, "Well. I'll take your word for it", is another instance of him avoiding response, of not expressing what his true beliefs on the matter are. Without this expression from Cohen, Alicia's statements find no standing in the world, do not get registered, since in the absence of the third-person view, only their mutual agreement, as well as disagreement, determines the world. However, Cohen neither agrees, nor disagrees, and in doing so, Alicia's views remain only her views, hanging in the air. Similarly, Cohen's referral to "classical somatic delusion" is to be understood as an instance of him avoiding response, by deferring it to theory, by hiding behind the theory. A point that Alicia makes explicitly in her criticisms of therapy.

> You dont think the therapist has all that much capacity for healing.
>
> I think what most people think. That it's caring that heals, not theory. Good the world over. (*Stella Maris*52)

Alicia's criticism here expresses the view that it is action and response, namely caring, rather than knowledge and theory, that has the power to heal illness. Furthermore, by stating that it's a commonplace assumption, she's bringing into view the fact that her call for a different way to treat the mentally ill is only different from Cohen's, but not from the way ordinary people think about the problem. Furthermore, it should also be read as a call upon Cohen to reveal himself as a part of Alicia's situation, which can only come from him acting in it, assuming a role in the picture, to care about what Alicia has to say, which would mean putting forth his own views against hers, rather than just let her views hang in the air, like he did with her remarks on boredom. First, he claims people get bored. When Alicia negates the claim, he simply acquiesces. It makes no difference then, whether he is in front of Alicia, or not.

> How is acknowledgment expressed; that is, how do we put ourselves in another's presence? …By revealing ourselves, by allowing ourselves to be seen. When we do not, when we keep ourselves in the dark, the consequence is that we convert the other into a character and make the world a stage for him. (*Must We Mean* 333)

Acknowledgement requires self-revelation. By keeping themselves out of the picture they make of Alicia's situation, Cohen and Horowitz assume the role of a spectator. "Sometimes [Horowitz] would just sit and watch me" (*Stella Maris*123). The requirement for them is to put themselves into the movie, make Alicia's present theirs as well–this would be what "chat" would mean, as opposed to "therapy". Alicia remarks that the doctors "dont seem to consider the care with which the world of the mad is assembled. A world which they imagine themselves questioning when of course they are not. The alienist skirts the edges of lunacy as the priest does sin. Stalled at the door of his own mandate" (*Stella Maris*51-52). This dialogue occurs just before the one where Alicia states that what is needed by the patient to be healed is care, and not theory. Here, she alleges that the doctors consider madness in a manner similar to how priests consider sin. They are restricted by their theories, and how these theories understand the subject; they stay behind the screen of their theories, as mere spectators. In one instance, Cohen asks Alicia to tell him what she remembers of the day when, at four years old, she was taken to an eye doctor who was the first to diagnose her as "crazy" (81). Alicia asks him what he wants to know in particular, but Cohen tells her to just describe it:

> All right. I got up around seven and went downstairs and my grandmother was in the kitchen and she gave me a glass of orange juice and then she told me to go up and wake my mother…
>
> I was in my pajamas with the dogs on them and I went up and woke my mother and she

asked me what time it was and I told her and then I went back down to the kitchen and Granellen put me in my chair…

She was fixing breakfast and the radio was on and I could see out the window. I could see Granellen's car parked in the driveway. The car was blue and she'd just gotten it. I think it was only the second car she ever had. It was wintertime and there was a fire in the stove and the trees outside were bare and the cows had come up to the fence at the bottom of the drive and the trees along the creek were gray and dead-looking. I had a bowl of cornflakes and my mother came down and had some coffee and then she took me upstairs and got me dressed. I wore my green corduroy skirt with the shoulderstraps and a green sweater and my Poll Parrot shoes with the straps that snapped. We left for Knoxville a little before eight oclock.

Okay. I think I get it. Why dont you just tell me what the doctor said. (*Stella Maris*82)

In the exchange above, the readers get to listen to Alicia reminisce about a tragic day in her life. The first impulse would be to read Alicia's story ironically, as her taunting Cohen. However, the care with which she goes into the details is evidence of Alicia's sincerity in telling it. The way she goes about it is not unlike the traditional first-person narrator stories, a mode of story-telling that will not be found anywhere else throughout *Stella Maris*. Thereaders find that Alicia used to wake her mother up in the morning, had pyjamas with prints of dogs on them, that her grandmother had recently bought a blue car which was the second car she ever bought, that there were cows where she lived, that she used to have cornflakes for breakfast, that she wore matching green skirt and sweater on her way, and the way she describes her shoes also is imbued with a spirit of loving care. In no other instance in the dialogues do the readers get these mundane details about Alicia's life which speaks volumes about Alicia's criticism that the

doctors “dont seem to consider the care with which the world of the mad is assembled” (51). Cohen interrupts Alicia, and instead redirects Alicia into telling what the eye doctor said to her. The questions that Cohen asks are directly responsible for the mundane details of Alicia’s life not entering the dialogues. He is restricted by psychiatry’s understanding of mental patients, and would rather hear what the doctor said than what Alicia has to say, as if something in Alicia, call it her body, were obstructing the view of something he wanted to see. Therefore, he might assume himself to be the spectator, but while he does so, is unaware of how much he is a part of the picture, and how much Alicia is a part of the picture that he is in. In other words, the picture of Cohen as the spectator is a false picture of Alicia’s situation, but one that Cohen is insisting on being true.

Cohen, by assuming Alicia’s mind to be the object of his knowledge, deflects the problem of response, and insists on certainty. However, what obstructs the clear view of this knowledge, he finds to be Alicia herself. Therefore, Cohen can be characterised as sceptical of another mind, filled with doubts about the claims to its knowledge. For instance, in their sixth session, Alicia discloses to Cohen that she had asked Bobby to marry her, which is followed by Cohen asking her if she was “serious” (161), desiring to know what Bobby’s response was. Alicia further discloses that they had also shared a kiss in which “there was no innocence at all” (161), to which Cohen again expresses disbelief, asking if Alicia is serious about what she’s saying, then goes on asking more questions regarding her age when she first “realized” her love for Bobby (162), his age when she asked him to marry her, if he had “girlfriends” or not (162). Here, one can see that Alicia is directed by Cohen’s questions towards memories that are painful to her, for shortly after, she begins to cry, which is registered in the world after Cohen’s utterance “I’m sorry. I didnt mean to make you cry” (*Stella Maris*163). It should be noticed that

the fact of Alicia crying can only be registered in the world through Cohen's response. The true picture of Alicia's situation cannot at all be registered without Cohen's utterance. Here, it is Cohen's sympathy which brings into view Alicia crying in the world; this particular knowledge cannot be had, for this particular moment, apart from this particular expression of sympathy. Alicia responds by a reciprocal acknowledgement, "You didnt" (163), meaning she's sympathetic about him making her cry despite him not meaning to. Anita Avramides claims that "just as I must acknowledge what I see in the case of the other, so the other must acknowledge what she sees in me. In other words, acknowledgement is reciprocal" (*Sceptic Outsider Others* 184). In the case of Alicia and Cohen, by their reciprocal acknowledgement, they create a moment in their world.

Cohen then asks Alicia if she wants to stop, and in other previous instances where Alicia gets upset, she does choose to stop and take a break. In this case, however, Alicia chooses to proceed, and in fact, after having heard what Alicia had to say regarding her incestuous desire, it is Cohen, who, for the first time in their conversation, requests for a break. He becomes deeply unsettled by what he hears. In this instance, one sees Cohen, when exposed to the other, come out of the screen that theories had created, with his humanity in full display, and no theories to guide him. In this instance, he's not a therapist, but a person with whom Alicia had a chat. However, the following exchange takes place in their next session:

> It occurred to me that when a patient unburdens herself of some new intimacy–even if the therapist might like to think that he's earned a new level of trust, it may not be that at all. So what may it be at all? Do you think.

> It could be that she's afraid that the therapy is threatening to reveal some other intimacy she considers more private. Although I grant you that might be hard to imagine. (*Stella Maris* 169)

The knowledge he came upon in their previous session unsettled Cohen deeply. "To accept my exposure in the case of others seems to imply an acceptance of the possibility that my knowledge of others may be overthrown, even that it ought to be" (*Claim of Reason* 439). However, in the next session, he responds to this knowledge by expressing a desire for something more from Alicia that could settle the matter, something that would perhaps be theorizable, and therefore, easy to explain; something that would give him a firm ground to stand on. However, this is exactly the move that needs to be denied if Cavel's arguments concerning the problem of another minds hold true. "The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude. I have to acknowledge humanity in the other, and the basis of it seems to lie in me" (*CR* 433). Cohen, here, needs to realize that the truth of the situation lies not in Alicia solely, she cannot give him that which could resettle him. Instead, the response to her is a part of the picture, and this response has to come from him, is his response. "It is important for Cavell that my acknowledgement isn't the result of the registration of some particular feature in the other that I can point to as a justification for my behaviour. I just respond; the response is *mine*" (*Knowing Acknowledging Others* VI, par. 4). However, by insisting on certainty, he is deferring the problem of response, his response, which is to say, he is hiding himself from the picture.

Perhaps, Cohen assumes that a total knowledge of Alicia's experience would grant him that firm ground to stand on, and settle the matter, therefore his insistence on knowing more. For

what is it that Cohen is after if not the position from which one could see what Alicia sees, and how she sees it, exactly as she sees it–when he assumes her full disclosure of her incestuous desire as an attempt to hide something more intimate? He wants to know what it is that she's hiding, something that only Alicia could be said to have the knowledge of, and to be in possession of such knowledge, he'd have to be Alicia, because no matter what she'd disclose, there's always the chance of more being hidden; but this is impossible.

Here, it would be helpful to explicate on Alicia's scepticism of the phrase 'I see'. In its first use by Cohen, Alicia requests him to avoid using it, to which Cohen responds, "It just means I'm trying to understand your point of view" (*Stella Maris*9). In its second use by Cohen, Alicia again requests him, "You should really try to stop saying that" (26). In the third instance, Cohen uses the phrase to respond to Alicia's explication on the foundational problem of mathematics, and Alicia does not request, but expresses her scepticism, "I dont think so" (66). In the fourth instance, Cohen uses the phrase to respond to Alicia disclosing that she wanted to be married to her brother, and Alicia replies "I doubt it" (161). In the same session, there is the following exchange:

> I told him that I wanted to have his child.
>
> You told your brother that you wanted to have his child.
>
> Look. It's no good you repeating these things to me as if to limn the horror and the lunacy of them. You cant see the world I see. You cant see through these eyes. You never will.
>
> I'm sure that's true. (163).

Cohen, repeating what Alicia says to him, without any modification on his part, can be taken to mean that he's attempting to get inside her world. This can be contrasted to the way

Alica registers Cohen's utterances as hypothesis or propositions, when it enters her world, that is, she gives the utterances a judgement, they are stood against the world, whereas Cohen does not do so with Alicia's, or at least, is trying his best not to; he hides himself, and lets the world be entirely Alicia's, in order to see what that world is like, however, this gives her utterances no standing; there's neither any agreement nor any disagreement concerning where her utterances stand in their shared world. Therefore, Cohen agreeing to Alicia regarding her scepticism of Cohen ever being able to see the world in a way that she sees it is contradictory, since the questions he asks assumes that he can. If he is to agree with Alicia's scepticism regarding the phrase 'I see', he has to give up on his desire for total knowledge, and instead consider things from his own position as a fallible human subject; he has to risk his own judgement, rather than defer the judgement to some theory or body of knowledge while assuming the position of a detached knower. Cohen's position expresses "a wish for the connection between [his] claims of knowledge and the objects upon which the claims are to fall to occur without [his] intervention, apart from [his] agreements" (*Claim of Reason* 351-352). By trying to understand her point of view, what he avoids is seeing his own point of view, where he stands in the world. This explains why none of Alicia's criticisms regarding therapy, psychiatry or psychology are acknowledged by Cohen. He simply listens to them, but does not offer his judgement on the matter.

The fact that he was disturbed enough to take a break after being unable to process Alicia's desire reveals his humanity. He could not remain objective when faced with it, the pretence that his profession demands is stripped off of him. It is a moment of self-revelation, that opens the space up for a moment of self-recognition. However, by insisting on certainty in the next session, he closes this space, and again turns to Alicia for answers, that is, he avoids self-recognition. He desires a total knowledge of Alicia's experience, without himself coming into

the picture, as if he could become Alicia. However, the truth is that he cannot do so, he is a human being, finite and situated.

Cavell terms this condition “metaphysical finitude” (*Must We Mean* 263). It expresses the fact that one cannot possess another’s experience, become that person. Anita Avramides expresses it thus: “I am me and you are you” (*Knowing Acknowledging Others* VI, par. 5). In other words, there is an unbridgeable separateness between beings. "There's a gap in between / There's a gap where we meet / Where I end and you begin" (Radiohead). In fact, this gap, that separates me from you, is well-avowed by the scepticism concerning another mind, and here, Cavell as well as Avramides, are in agreement with the sceptic. Where they depart, however, is in their understanding of this separateness. For them, the sceptic’s mistake lies in interpreting “metaphysical finitude” as an “intellectual lack” (*Must We Mean* 263). Instead, Cavell argues that “the truth of skepticism” lies in understanding that “Our relation to the world as a whole, or to others in general, is not one of knowing, where knowing construes itself as being certain” (*Claim of Reason* 45). It is for this understanding to come forth, that knowledge does not ground the relation between beings and beings, as well as beings and the world they inhabit, Cavell developed the concept of acknowledgement which avoids the problem of intellectualizing metaphysical finitude. In *Stella Maris*, the intellectualization of metaphysical finitude is expressed through Cohen's insistence on knowing what it is that Alicia knows, her point of view, only for him to find that the primary obstacle to this knowledge is Alicia herself, the fact of her separateness. Therefore, what he’s trying to get rid of, when he insists on knowledge about what Alicia knows, is Alica herself. Francey Russel, in her study of Roman Polanski's film *Chinatown*, explores the difference between knowing a person, and knowing what a person knows, how an obsession with the latter can obscure the demands of the former.

> The conceptual and ethical need for acknowledgment, as Cavell articulates it, is felt just at the place where the capacity for knowledge is outstripped in the face of another person, and the need for a form of relating *other* than knowing becomes pronounced. What would it mean for Jake to *know* Evelyn, and how is this different than knowing *what* she knows? What would be gained by learning her secret? The film suggests that, in fact, very little is gained by this new knowledge. Instead something is lost: the possibility for something like acknowledgment. (Russel 8)

In the context of *Stella Maris*, Cohen's insistence on knowing Alicia's secret, knowing her point of view, that is, an insistence on knowing what she knows, ultimately overshadows the need to know Alicia. For Stanley Cavell, insisting on certainty when it comes to the problem of other minds, that is, when it comes to knowing another person, is a misunderstanding of what it means to know another person. Knowledge, when its subject is the thoughts and feelings of another, can only be understood in terms of acknowledgement. In *Stella Maris*, this truth, although not told of, shows itself. For instance, in the first session, while talking about the family history of the famous mathematician Grothendieck, one of the most prominent mathematicians of the 20th century and a principal figure in the dialogues since he is someone whom Alicia refers to as a friend and with whom she has worked and corresponded, Alicia begins to cry. However, this is not registered into the world as such. Instead, Cohen responds with an expression of doubt, "Are you crying?" (*Stella Maris* 12). This is similar to Alicia registering Cohen's utterances as hypothesis and propositions by standing them against the world. However, instead of confirming or disconfirming, Alicia responds with an apology, "I'm sorry" (12), from which the fact gets registered into the world as a fact. It is through reciprocal acknowledgement, of a doubt responded with an apology, that the fact finds meaning in the world. Similarly, in

another instance, while recalling how she cried and could not finish playing Bach's *Chaconne* in an expensive Amati violin she'd just bought, she begins to cry. Again, Cohen responds with questions, but it registers into the world as fact this time, "Why were you crying? Why are you crying?" (*Stella Maris* 59). Alicia again responds with an apology, then responds, "For more reasons than I could tell you" (59). Here, the knowledge of Alicia crying cannot be possessed without Cohen's questions. However, Alicia responds to these questions with an apology, which could also explain her problems with being forthcoming, she does not want her pain to encroach upon others. The true picture of the situation is then received only through reciprocal acknowledgement.

Finally, it can be concluded that Alicia's disagreement with therapy lies in its objective stance, with non-relational and sceptical assumptions. Therefore, her renewal of the terms of a prior agreement, by validating the move away from Robert Cohen, demands of Cohen a similar validation, by a move away from therapy. However, not too far, sincetherapy is still chatting. In fact, all therapy session can said to involve chatting, while not all chats are therapy sessions. This would explain why Alicia continues on with the conversations even when they involve the assumptions of therapy; they cannot be distinguished from chatting. Therefore, Alicia's agreement to "chatting" should be understood as her acknowledging another human being as playing a central role in the treatment of mental illness, and the pain it entails, while simultaneously calling for a move away from non-relational and objective way of treating the patients.

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