

9. Remembering Stanley Cavell

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For over four decades one of the most distinctive and original contributors to American letters—and one of the world's most significant proponents of what philosophy could learn from the arts—was a member of the community of Emerson Hall. But so long as Stanley Cavell is best known just as a philosopher who wrote about Shakespeare and movies (as he was first introduced to me), and even if his unassailable institutional legacy is as the advisor of generations of accomplished philosophers (and film and literary scholars), the task for philosophers memorializing Cavell is to communicate what he *taught* us, and in particular what he taught us to *do*.

We can begin by saying that Cavell was a reader of Wittgenstein. In particular, Cavell was a reader of the methods of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as methods for understanding ourselves. This not only opened that text to readers for whom frustrated attempts to locate a body of doctrines had closed it off; it also opened up lines of communication between that text and older understandings of philosophy as a method for arriving at self-consciousness (especially Kant's transcendental philosophy) as well as the methods of self-avowal characteristic of psychoanalysis.¹ Given that Wittgenstein's later philosophy is often read as conservative or quietist, it is important to note that Cavell's writing also located the emancipatory potential of *Philosophical Investigations*, particularly in Wittgenstein's exhortation that we turn our inquiry around our "real need."² In a conscious rebuke to misunderstandings of

1. Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 64-67.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §108.

what it meant to be an “ordinary language philosopher,” Cavell saw, in his reading of Wittgenstein, the ordinary as precisely the site for philosophical criticism: “Wittgenstein’s appeal or ‘approach’ to the everyday finds the (actual) everyday to be as pervasive a scene of illusion and trance and artificiality (of need) as Plato or Rousseau or Marx had found.”³

One human need that Cavell articulated with particular poignancy was the need to speak for others (to constitute a community through one’s speech), as well as the correlative need to be spoken for by others (to find oneself in the community of another’s speech). In the first four essays of his first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, the significance of this need emerged through Cavell’s interrogating the practice of Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin of asserting “what we say,” apparently without empirical linguistic evidence. What could entitle them to such assertions? What criteria could they be relying on? Particularly as these questions were developed in Part One of *The Claim of Reason* (1979), Cavell insisted that our understanding of them will be distorted so long as we think of the ground of intelligibility as always given, as opposed to always at stake in—and as constituted by—our aiming to be intelligible to others. That is, the charge for being intelligible to others lay in us, in our ability to project criteria into new contexts (often requiring creativity and improvisation), and it could not—as Cavell reminded us, against persistent philosophical fantasies—lie in criteria alone.⁴ Consequently, whereas others would have understood the question of what entitles us to assertions about “what we say” as a narrowly epistemological question, Cavell insisted that its full significance could not be understood without seeing its affinities with certain political questions—some of them familiar from Rousseau—including that of how to constitute a community when a pre-existing Social Contract is not assured, as well as when we suspect that “we are exercising our will not to the general but to the particular, to the partial, to the unequal, to private benefit, to privacy.”⁵

3. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 46.

4. See Steven G. Affeldt, “The Ground of Mutuality: Criteria, Judgment and Intelligibility in Stephen Mulhall and Stanley Cavell,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2002): 1-31.

5. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 26.

Indeed, one of Cavell's abiding concerns was to draw attention to the ways in which the formulation of a philosophical problem might distort the real need or interest motivating that problem in the first place. This is most evident in his writing on skepticism, and in his arguments that the problem of skepticism about other minds ("How can I really know you are in pain?") is in fact a theoretical registration of our separateness from others—a feature of the human condition that cannot be "solved," though nothing is more characteristic of humans than to deny it or try to overcome it.⁶ Among those, in their jealousy and possessiveness, who have struggled with this separateness are King Lear, King Leontes, and Othello, though it was in the book immediately following Cavell's plaintive reading of *Othello* at the end of *The Claim of Reason* that he began to give us his positive vision, not of tragedy but of comedy, and of how we might create a community founded on our shared separateness. Thus, in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981), Cavell argued, through readings of seven Hollywood romantic comedies, that, just as we cannot depend simply on preexisting criteria in order to be intelligible to one another, "There is no place to go in order to acquire the authority of connection...You cannot wait for the perfected community to be presented."⁷ And yet, for the seven couples examined in that book, sometimes despite themselves, a community happens.

I did not get to see Stanley in the last year of his life. But in the nine years at the end of his life in which I did know him, I was inspired as he approached his aging with the happy spirit of an inveterate improviser. He could always be relied on to ad lib. I remember in 2010—after a large standing-room-only occasion at Harvard celebrating the publication that year of his memoir *Little Did I Know*—the very last of us were filing out of the lecture hall: I turned around to find behind me the very man who had been fêted for the last two hours—only this time alone, human, and unguarded. "Ha, I didn't realize who was behind me!" I said to Stanley, to which he replied, "Don't worry—we're *all* behind you."

The fact that in the course of the deepest readings of some of our most public texts and films we can also find such authentically private assurances is surely a big

6. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 96.

7. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 109.

part of what will keep many of us permanently pinned to Stanley Cavell's writing. In that way, his writing shows us how to go on.⁸

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