

## Between Mourning and Desire

VICTOR J. KREBS

I found myself attaching a small prayer for thoughts that have never come, or never been given sufficient appreciation. Priceless uncollecteds.

CAVELL, "The World as Things"

During the month of November 1998, Stanley Cavell visited Caracas, Venezuela, invited by the Museum of Fine Arts and the philosophy department of Simon Bolivar University, to hold a three-day seminar on art and philosophy. During those days, Cavell presented and commented on the films *Jean Dillman*, by Chantal Ackerman and *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker, as well as two lectures on material he was working on at that time: "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting,"<sup>1</sup> which was published in a volume by the Guggenheim Museum with the Pompidou Center, where he also read that conference that same year (it later appeared in a final version in 2005 in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*).<sup>2</sup> The second lecture was "Trials of Praise," where he talked about Henry James and Fred Astaire.

From this event a text was prepared for publication with transcriptions of the discussions that gave rise to presentations by Cavell, translated into Spanish, as well as an interview in two parts (one in Caracas, and another between Caracas and Boston, after the event). The publication of the text, which was being prepared by the Museum of Fine Arts, was suspended as a result of the intervention of the Venezuelan cultural institutions by the Chávez regime, which canceled all the projects of the previous administrations. Since then some extracts have been published in Spanish in

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1. Cavell, "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting," in *Rendezvous: Masterpieces from the Georges Pompidou Center and the Guggenheim Museums* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 64-89.

2. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

various magazines in Latin America, from the interview with Cavell, but the rest of the book remains unpublished.

The text that follows was prepared as an introduction to that book and its references are all to the unpublished text of 1998.

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In the current philosophical scene, especially in Latin America, where the idea of scientific knowledge still haunts the aspirations of philosophy, Stanley Cavell's thought constitutes a radically different and important alternative. Having trained during the height of logical positivism in the forties and fifties in Berkeley and Harvard, and as one of the most distinguished philosophers in his generation in America, Cavell is deeply and intimately aware of the concerns and motivations of so-called Analytical Philosophy, with which he finds himself, however, in constant and permanent tension. And this is so not because he has opted for its traditional alternative, Continental Philosophy, which is for him nothing less than the other half of the split in the Western mind which he aims to overcome. (He once wrote famously, "it is not as if the problem were for opposed positions to be reconciled, but for the halves of the mind to go back together."<sup>3</sup>) His conflict with Analytical Philosophy lies rather in the fact that its espousal of the ideal of scientific knowledge tends to become a mechanism of evasion by which it can betray philosophy's "unlimited responsibility, or its demand upon itself for unending responsiveness, to the world."<sup>4</sup> Cavell is not interested, however, in redefining philosophy or erasing the boundaries that separate it from other humanistic disciplines. As he explains:

I am no more willing that philosophy should be identified with poetry or with cultural criticism [...] than I am willing to see that philosophy should be identified with science [...] One way I have characterized philosophy is as the search for itself.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 241.

4. Cavell, "Interview," in *Caracas Seminar*, 14.

5. Richard Flemming and Michael Payne (eds.), *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 56.

In other words, Cavell is attempting to recover philosophy's initial commitment to the search for self-knowledge, and he does this in a new way insofar as he conceives this aim not as a form of positive knowledge but as an attitude and a commitment to the intellectual life, primarily to make oneself intelligible to others. It soon becomes clear that the task involves above all a sensitivity to the diverse ways in which we are prone to obstruct our own vision, or block the path to our true need. This is perhaps why, as Cavell claims, the best way to come to philosophy is in a crisis, for it is in our own resistances to self-intelligibility that we can find our way; as he puts it, "they are fruitful things, to be followed if you are not to be lost to yourself."<sup>6</sup>

One of his most important contributions to current philosophical reflection is his reinterpretation of the problem of skepticism, an obsession of modern philosophy since its articulation in Descartes, which has defined its almost exclusively epistemological concern. Cavell shows that it can be understood—or rather, that it should be treated—not as an intellectual problem in need of solution but as an always possible existential crisis, a crisis in the life of the mind. The thought it gives expression to, namely, that we don't know with certainty of the existence of the external world (or other minds), requires no solution. Skepticism merely articulates the radical fragility of our natural condition with which we must learn to live, but it has the power to activate in us a need for certainty and so a false demand for security, which threatens to snap "the thread of sensory immediacy"<sup>7</sup> which binds our relation with things. The demand for certainty in our relation with the world ignores the ordinary character of sensible experience and the real nature of the subject, and thus fractures the link between experience and thought, between our ordinary language and our theoretical concepts. Insofar as we conceive skepticism as a problem it is an intellectual illusion that reveals the faint line that separates reason from its shadow, how philosophy's commitment to reason makes it so vulnerable to madness.

Although Cavell adopts the Kantian perspective in his treatment of skepticism, he rejects Kant's idealization of the self as a transcendental locus, which renders it impossible to articulate our intimacy with the world, and so forces us to ignore our intuitive sense of our relation with things. Cavell rather emphasizes its embodied

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6. Cavell, *Caracas Seminar*, Tuesday, 6.

7. *Ibid.*, Thursday, 34.

condition, recognizing it as subject to the vicissitudes of our real and concrete situation. He thus considers experience not merely in terms of the Understanding but also in terms of our sensibility and desire—in other words, not merely in terms of its conditions of intelligibility, but also (as he puts it, in his beautiful and illuminating discussion of Chantal Akerman’s film *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* [1975]), in terms of “the conditions of its completion and disruption.”<sup>8</sup> In this way he not only extends the Kantian answer to skepticism but also derives a new task for philosophy from Kant’s own characterization of aesthetic judgment in the third critique, according to which the condition for claiming that something is beautiful, for example, is the demand for agreement on the part of others, even despite the possibility of rejection or rebuke. He thus establishes a general strategy for the treatment of philosophical problems that is grounded in an acknowledgement of the fragility of our concrete circumstances and in the clear awareness of the fate of our words as subject to the limitations of our own constitution—as much to our resistance to the demands of concrete experience as to our dependence on the receptiveness of beings similar to us, suffering the same constraints and limitations, the same difficulties of feeling, as we do.

Cavell is practicing a new way of thinking, one that renounces the need for possession that has characterized it in modern philosophy and assumes it rather as a loving receptiveness. As he puts it, following Heidegger, it is thinking as thanking or as praise. Philosophy therefore abandons the search for scientific knowledge and its attitude of control in favor of the cultivation of awareness in a conduct of gratitude, in which the task, far from the attempt to penetrate or tear from the object its essence, consists rather in “a specification or test of tribute,”<sup>9</sup> where I have to stake myself on the basis of nothing more, but also nothing less, than my own capacity to make myself intelligible to others. This defines a different agenda for philosophical criticism, where the dangers it faces are those of self-deception, the resistance to one’s own desire, the fear of one’s own mind—in other words, all those risks which Cavell has characterized as “the trials of praise.”<sup>10</sup>

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8. Cavell, “The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting,” in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 255.

9. Cavell, *Caracas Seminar*, Wednesday, 6.

10. *Ibid.*

Skepticism may be seen then, in this new perspective, as a denial of our finitude, as the expression of a need, as old as Plato himself, to overcome our limitations and establish our citizenship in another world. But what modern skepticism specifically discovers, according to Cavell, is that our own words can deceive us, that the enemy, so to speak, resides in our own hearts. For this reason he proposes to undermine the problem, explicitly assuming the responsibility which it is meant to evade:

This threat of skepticism is something you can repress or disguise with false cheerfulness and mock intellectuality. I want to turn that threat around so that one sees it is still possible to become responsible for one's language without having to claim more justification than one's own grounding in oneself, in one's own life [...] I am able to take responsibility for every word that comes out of my mouth, as a way of accepting that there is no responsibility for the world but my own. And this is something that everyone has to say; and it's something I want philosophy to teach each person to say in the midst of the temptation to skepticism.<sup>11</sup>

Appealing, with Wittgenstein and Austin, to ordinary language, Cavell establishes the task to treat our words, not as mere vehicles of information or objects of intellectual knowledge, but as part of a concrete and vital activity, as expressions of will and desire, to which we need to learn to listen in our concrete actions—or to see them as actions themselves, inserted in the world—approaching them affectively, and thus with a greater personal commitment than that of a merely intellectual interest. For Cavell it is essential that philosophy begin with our subjectivity, as if its starting point should always be in one's own concrete experience, and especially attentive of one's own interest. The issue of desire, in other words, is central to his conception of philosophy.

An extraordinary demonstration of the type of criticism he practices—as well as of the singular suitability of film as a medium for it—is offered by his moving reading of two routines of Fred Astaire's, which realizes in a concrete way the aspiration

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11. Cavell, "Interview," 3.

to make of philosophy an exercise in which we seek “to get into the right relation to an object by finding the idea of it to which one may pay tribute,”<sup>12</sup> as if one’s own existence depended on the acceptance of this claim or judgment. What is at stake behind Cavell’s analysis of Astaire’s dance is nothing less than the on-going process whereby an always perfectible self seeks its realization; it constitutes a determined struggle against that habitual tendency in us to underestimate our own experience and thoughts which is responsible for what Thoreau calls our “quiet desperation.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Cavell conceives this as a task of deep political significance; it amounts to assuming our commitment to our own pleasure and interest before the culture to which we belong. As he says, speaking of his reading of Astaire:

If I am to possess my own experience I cannot afford to cede it to my culture as the culture stands. I must find ways to insist upon it, if I find it unheard. A way for me is to pose the question: Is this art of song and of dance, which I make part of my existence, a part I wish to demand that others recognize to be part of theirs, to be something from which we stand to derive pleasure of what is beautiful, hence, according to Socrates, something to be loved? Is this rightly ours to declare?<sup>14</sup>

It is not surprising then that skepticism is characterized as an erotic dynamic which Cavell finds not only in philosophy but, illuminatingly, in Shakespeare’s tragedies, in the madness of King Lear, for example, which he describes as the result of

[having] wanted so to love the world, to find it worthy of praise, that upon discovering that it is unpraiseworthy you cannot stop wanting its love. This is [...] the occasion for cursing the world precisely for its not providing your cause of praise, hence being left with the doubt that its behavior is caused by your having cursed it with a tainted love.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Cavell, *Caracas Seminar*, Wednesday, 9.

13. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 7.

14. Cavell, “Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise,” in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 82.

15. Cavell, *Caracas Seminar*, Tuesday, 10.

The logic he outlines thus suggests that in our conception of the philosophical problem, and in our subsequent urge to solve it, we may be enacting an unconscious evasion of this dynamic, witnessing a constitutional resistance to the expressive or affective dimension or experience.

If Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholy" may be said to instruct us in "the difference between the pain of losing what has meant the world to us and the pain of returning to the world that must contain loss,"<sup>16</sup> we could say that the texts that follow are themselves a meditation on that lesson as it pertains to the fate of philosophy—not the academic discipline, however, but the human calling that goes by that name. It is as if with Descartes' landmark expression of modern skepticism, the philosophical denial of the world became an emblem of the human resistance to the transitory, an instance of the pathological side of mourning.

But Cavell refuses to see the situation merely as a neurosis. He is proposing rather the cultivation of an oblique way of seeing which, as he tells us, provides "a picture of getting to know that makes it indirect, negates the direction in which philosophy takes knowledge to come."<sup>17</sup> This does not mean, however, that philosophy ought to renounce its capacity to penetrate or see behind appearances to grasp the essence of things. The objects in the world are inexhaustible in their interest and their capacity to awaken us to the extraordinary, so we simply need to transform that power of penetration into "the ability to be patient, to suffer, to penetrate by allowing oneself to think another way, to be differently, more strongly, more finely, struck."<sup>18</sup> As he goes on to explain:

It is a readiness to stop when you have nothing more to say; a willingness to subject yourself to silence, to mortality, to finitude, to end, to your own limitation [...] allowing death, mortality, finitude, to come into philosophizing, thus capturing something of what it means to say that to philosophize is to learn how to die.<sup>19</sup>

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16. *Ibid.*

17. Cavell, "Interview," 17.

18. Cavell, *Caracas Seminar*, Tuesday, 17.

19. *Ibid.*, 18.

It is not surprising that Cavell's proposal is aversive to a philosophy that identifies itself with the ideals of scientific rigor and clarity, a philosophy that is always intent on denying our limitation, evading the reality of death, hence unwilling to be surprised, holding on to its poor certainties and denying itself the discovery of what is important in the trivial or the ordinary. Cavell seeks a conversion of philosophy, which involves an attitude of receptiveness and the acknowledgement of a hidden activity beyond our consciousness and will, behind the silence of our words, of our objects, and even of our own mind.

This demand for listening and observation permeates Cavell's thought and informs his style of writing, where the reader must listen between the silences, hear voices behind the voices of the text, and enter into the secret dialogue between his words. As he notes, "we are, every instant and beyond all measures we recognize, affecting others (and ourselves) with our speech, hence with our silence; drawing blood as far as words reach, namely, in a word, everywhere."<sup>20</sup>

In company with Freud and Wittgenstein, he dedicates himself to the task of asking how and why our words sometimes get the best of us, or betray us, as if looking for their underside, insisting that we need to find out what they deny, not in order to determine the limits of our responsibility but to cultivate a lucid awareness of our real condition and learn to live with our own limitations. Ultimately it is a matter of recovering for philosophy that tragic consciousness which it has lost in its epistemological obsession, in its disowning the reality of desire.

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20. Cavell, "Interview," 15.