

Introduction: Acknowledging Stanley Cavell

EDITORIAL COMMENT

A year has elapsed since Stanley Cavell died, and in that time those who knew him and read his work, have been coming to terms with his permanent departure. For many it has not been easy, and part of this difficulty includes trying to say something in writing about what the loss has meant, or might entail, or perhaps better, what it stirs in us.

Shortly after Cavell's death, I was in conversation with the editors of this journal, and we were all thinking similar thoughts, namely, that a commemorative issue was in order. The editors graciously invited me to guest edit, and accepting the honor, I turned in kind to the community of Cavell's readers—his friends, colleagues, admirers, and others beyond the immediate circle—to solicit reflections. The idea, a familiar one for those inclined to commemorate the loss of a beloved, esteemed writer and thinker by offering further words, was to invite a small, representative, and willing group to share remarks in the wake of Stanley Cavell's death—that is, with an eye toward how his work lives on, and how he and his work have given us life. The present collection of dispatches is the result. There are, and have been, several similar initiatives afoot, and I believe, I hope, the benefactions here assembled are a fitting complement to those efforts.¹

As we have individually and collectively been processing what it is like to inhabit a world lived without Cavell—without his peerless company, without his unmatched philosophical aid and insight—we are all now, no doubt, thrown back upon his works, his words (a pleasure, to be sure) but also turned to them this time with memories of our earlier encounters of reading, and in some cases, in many cases also encounters with the man himself. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that the tone of many of these

1. Other commemorative projects include: *ASAP journal*, <http://asapjournal.com/tag/stanley-cavell>; *Forma de Vida*, <https://formadevida.org/?fbclid=IwAR3aW-zlPY1RGP7idwIZwyEHjV4GlO4XeQtIsXe-BmnIOHdkPmzglZUun-ds#scfdv15>; and the *London Review of Books* editors' blog, <https://www.lrb.-co.uk/blog/2018/06/20/the-editors/stanley-cavell>.

pieces might be taken up as variations on the genre known as Acknowledgments—so often arriving in the algorithm, “I wish to thank x for doing y and inspiring z .” The conceptual affiliation with Cavell’s master-word *acknowledgment* is palpably evident, and I hope to say something about the significance of that connection. But first, I don’t mean to suggest that the pieces for this special issue were *conceived* in the spirit of Acknowledgments, nor was my prompt to contributors framed along such lines, and yet, and yet, commemoration—“remembering together”—seems to have allowed for and encouraged a space of thinking and thanking (re-thinking, re-membering, *re-re-membering*, that is, re-cognizing coupled with the gesture of appreciative recognition) that feels kin to the kinds of things one wants, tries, to say in Acknowledgments. In this prefatory note, I am just putting a little more pressure on this resonance partly because I have long been fascinated—in Cavell’s own work—with the particular tone, registration, detail, cadence, and duration of his many, many (formal, published) Acknowledgments ... and Prefaces, Forewords, Afterwords, and allied occasional pieces that functioned in a similar vein (e.g., “Words of Welcome”).²

What I *did* say to the contributors was inspired by a conversation I had with Cavell in the months when he was just beginning to compose the autobiographical remarks that would become *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory*. As Cavell reflected on his method for writing this work, he said: “I’m seeking those moments from my life that rise to the level of philosophical significance.” Such a rich observation can turn us anew to *Little Did I Know*, and give us a fresh point of reference on how, say, a personal memory finds its way into the conversation of philosophy—and now, in Cavell’s case, a permanent home in the history of philosophy. For our purposes here, though, since we are all readers of Cavell’s work, we all have our own memories and moments to draw from; our first question will be to discern what of those thoughts and recollections we might wish to share with others, which may be worth sharing (by what criterion?)—rising to the level of philosophical significance. The discernment is not easy in easier circumstances; it is that much more trying in a state of mourning.

2. Cavell, “Words of Welcome,” in *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xi-xxviii.

Thinking over Cavell's remark, and as I tried to understand the method it conveyed, in so far as such a thing is possible from a single statement (yet, later, it would be triumphantly glossed in the pages that form *Little Did I Know*), I suggested to the prospective contributor to this special issue of *Conversations* that she feel free to adapt the following strands of "approach" to her piece—deciding, as she preferred, to make them distinctive, or as a braid or weave. The nature of how each strand might be gathered, and how it could be related to other strands, remained an open question, and at that, one for experimentation and exploration. (I did also welcome other forms of prose, such as correspondence, journal entries, poems; and solicited ideas that might not be captured by familiar categories of type and genre).

So, a few words to define or refine a first "approach," or strand of thinking: I imagined that a contributor might select a passage, or passages, from the breadth of Cavell's writing that taught her something formally and conceptually. I inquired: how did this piece or passage tutor you—that is, by way of Cavell's distinctive literary-philosophical voice—for instance, to think for the first time, or anew, about some crucial element worthy of philosophical discernment? And then another approach might be drawn in: If you knew Cavell personally—were in his classes or among those he mentored; if you collaborated with him, or shared his company in some other capacity—please do integrate reminiscences that are pertinent to your thinking out of these reflections. If you only "encountered" Cavell in his writings, then perhaps you can draw from memories of salient moments in your life with his writings—among them the first time you read his prose, the first time you taught his work in a course, or other occasions that befit your reply to the first approach.

I continued: with these pathways in mind, you can take up a topic or theme or problem as it relates, for example, to Cavell as philosopher, as pedagogue, as scholar, as writer, as reader, as critic, as colleague, as advisor, as mentor, as musician, as composer, as improviser, as *cinéaste*, as opera lover, as traveler, as public speaker, as correspondent, as American, as Jewish, as Harvardian, as friend, and befitting the spirit of the journal, as conversationalist. A further possibility, yet another approach, could share the spirit of the much-needed, incisive remarks offered in the immediate weeks after Cavell's death by Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier, thereby becoming a piece that explores Cavell's legacy on some enduring topic, or as a contri-

bution to a contemporary trend or vexing problem that would benefit from his work.³ However the contributors chose to take up or innovate from these suggestions, one thing is common and clear: we have before us a dynamic, unforgettable session of thinking further with Cavell as part of remembering him.

For those convened here, Stanley Cavell, in his personable, companionable presence, and to be sure, now and evermore in his writing, was and remains a gift to the gratifications of thinking itself. He was exemplary and thus provided a model to learn from while also prompting us to do our own work (which in many cases meant coming to terms and responding to his). For some, Cavell's interests were so compellingly conveyed by him—in his speech, in his writing—that we may have, on occasion, or for longer than that, lost sight of our own; more than a few students, acolytes, and fellow scholars have cited his achievements as an obstacle to their productivity, their own satisfactions (even happiness) in the midst of their attempts to independent scholarship. Like his work, Cavell himself, in his person, in the pitch and inflection of his voice, often proved magnetic and for that disorienting. We are familiar with the ersatz Emerson quotation “Who you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying,” which feels apt.⁴ But so do Emerson's own words: “The attitude, the tone, is all. [...] Let us not look east and west for materials of conversation, but rest in presence and unity. A just feeling will fast enough supply fuel for discourse, if speaking be more grateful than silence.”⁵ Now, in Cavell's absence, it remains to be known whether the attributes of his written work sustain a similar effect: that though we know it is worth our time and attention, saying precisely how and why may be beyond us. Let it not be behind us.

Fittingly, the following dispatches from the minds and memories of those who knew and loved Cavell, or contended in some fashion with his influence, are all, in some measure, “scenes of instruction”—even for those who met Cavell as adult colleagues and for those who never shared his company. If most of the contributors have had the pleasure and privilege of a personal relationship with Cavell, what is more striking is the continuity of the experience one has encountering Cavell's work in the classroom, in the lecture hall, and—far from his living presence, during his lifetime

3. “Stanley Cavell and the American Contradiction,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2018.

4. Emerson wrote, with his italics: “What you *are* stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary,” “Social Aims,” in *Letters and Social Aims* in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1903), 96.

5. *Ibid.*

and after it—in print: these disparate spaces convey a sensibility of a mind launched upon inquiry, and so where or whenever one joins Cavell, one will be launched as well. Whether one's encounter, then, was in person or on-the-page, the effect can evidently be much the same, which is to say: education with Cavell is, or can be, an ongoing, lifelong process. "Being his student," in the strict, literal sense is too limiting for what he has made possible for his readers—and continues to make possible, despite all, after his death.

Once, in conversation with Cavell, I pitched the idea that he might, because he could, one day prepare a volume comprised solely of his Prefaces, Forewords, Afterwords, front matter and back matter, including Acknowledgments, from many books (his own and not his own). He readily admitted that the sheer quantity would amount to a book, though we pondered—daydreamed—together what kind of book it might be: serial solicitations, each next one sustaining a mood of hospitality and cheer? How lovely. What a congenial context for philosophy's ongoing labors. In this imagined collection (that one can summon in one's own mind), I came to appreciate that its effect—albeit here as a moment of conceptual art, perhaps later as a printed artifact—would help to generate the feeling he conjures in the reader as a matter of course: namely, that she is welcome, a party to company she should like to have, holding fast to it now and into the future. For the complaints made concerning the "difficulty" of Cavell's prose, his style, there can be little doubt that one thing was never obscured: the ways in which his words made one feel invited, a legitimate partner for thoughts worth dwelling upon and sharing. For me, and so many others, such a gift has proved a grace.

Our collective remarks may be figured as Afterwords in themselves—or some variant: sketches composed in the wake of an auspicious experience, a veritable post-script, a kind of journal entry or notes from an expedition jotted down eagerly, aiming to capture the vitality of a crucial moment of mind and heart. From each new perspective, we catch a glimpse of recollection and remembrance married to sentiment and insight. Given that there are so many new readers yet to come, that is to say *posterity*, an audience emerging anew from "tomorrow and the day after tomorrow," perhaps we can take a measure from Cavell himself and think of these words, our words, as contributing to the spirit of welcoming. Not just consultations with ourselves, or shared reminiscences among friends and colleagues supplied as a votive for

support and succor, but perhaps most importantly, as an invitation to all of those for whom Stanley Cavell's work awaits. And how.

June 19th, 2019

DAVID LaROCCA

Acknowledgments

It is not an afterthought—how could it be?—to inscribe my own Acknowledgments at the end of these remarks, at the head of this issue. For me, it has been a genuine privilege to liaise this congress in honor of Stanley Cavell and a pleasure to collaborate with its generous members. Let me convey my sincere thanks to the contributors for taking the time to amplify Cavell's many gifts to us by acknowledging them. This gathering of "congenial spirits" formed, as it should, a group effort.⁶ So many of the contributors helped me connect to promising prospects; if you see a name of someone you recommended, I send my thanks for the vote of support. In the scale of things, we are a relatively small community, and it seems even more important now, in Stanley's absence, that we know one another, or at the very least, know of one another. I am deeply grateful to the editors of the journal, Amir Khan and Sérgio Dias Branco for entrusting me with this project and for shepherding it through production. Moreover, several members of the journal's advisory board have been crucial in facilitating the development of content for the special issue.

An Extended, Ongoing Invitation

A note to readers and prospective contributors: if you wish to have your remarks on Stanley Cavell's legacy considered for a future supplement in *Conversations*, along

6. Timothy Gould's phrase from "Celebrating the Life and Work of Stanley Cavell," convened in Emerson Hall 105, Harvard University, November 10, 2018.

the lines of the pieces collected in the present volume, or some other, please contact me directly at davidlarocca@post.harvard.edu and I will be happy to receive your proposal.