

2. Cavell as a Way Into Philosophy

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Opening remarks given at a memorial event, "Celebrating the Life and Work of Stanley Cavell," convened in Emerson Hall 105, Harvard University, Saturday, November 10, 2018.

It is of course a great honor for me to say a few words about Stanley on this occasion, and to say a few things about what he has brought to philosophy, what he has meant to me, and what his work contributes to American writing. And it is also clear that I have been given an impossible task, as anyone will know who has so much as an inkling of the variety and sweep of the texts, the questions, and the human phenomena that he has made available to philosophical reflection over the course of his many books.

And there are other difficulties in making such an address, and one for me personally, or a particular difficulty anyway, in saying something about Stanley Cavell's contribution to philosophy, and this arises from the fact that for me his body of his writing and his example plays a concept-determining role in my access to the idea of philosophy as such. I mean not only that without his example, I wouldn't have an understanding of what philosophy is, or can be, such that I could aspire to be part of it. I also mean, in thinking of his work as a paradigm, that it has the status of a standard or a measure, against which the various achievements of twentieth century philosophy are to be understood. On every subject that he has contributed to, he has raised the stakes on the level of intellectual seriousness with which they are pursued, and the kinds of questions that it is possible to ask about them.

For the plain truth is, I would never have tried for a career in philosophy, or to have formed the idea of being a writer of philosophy were it not for his example. I mean many things by that, perhaps chiefly that his daring, and his sense of philosophy as an adventure and not only a set of problems, inspired and sustained me over

many years when I was reading philosophy, writing in notebooks, but before I considered applying to graduate school. And when I finally did, it was on the gamble that if a great spirit like his had found some kind of home in the academic world, then perhaps it wasn't as inhospitable to life as my previous experience had led me to believe. Like many of us, I suppose, I was an unhappy, alienated undergraduate, prone to disappointment in myself, in my teachers, and in the books I was trying to read. Philosophy inspired me, but I was going to need a special kind of encouragement to think that I could take the risk of seeing if I could make some contribution to it myself. —“Philosophy inspires much unhappy love.”¹

But I mean also something even more specific than that. In a literal and specific sense, I owe my first philosophical education to Stanley Cavell, even though it was many years before we met and he was never a formal teacher of mine.

As a college sophomore, I was drawn to the movies (it was the 70s, youth culture was movie culture) and I was both drawn to and intimidated by philosophy. And through luck I learned that there was this book about movies written by a Harvard philosophy professor called *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. I had no idea what “ontology” was, but as I started reading the first chapters I knew that I wanted in. It's hard to describe the excitement of discovering that intellectual voice, one for whom sophistication was not a pose, erudition not a hoard of possessions, brilliance not an avoidance of vulnerability and self-questioning but rather the means to make such vulnerabilities yield their insights. I remained intimidated, of course, but I also felt taken into the confidence of this voice, and eager to learn how I myself could earn that kind of confidence, as a reader, as a beginner. This was heady stuff for someone barely twenty years old.

The World Viewed was the first book of any kind which I immediately began re-reading as soon as I finished it. I just wanted more, and was eager to see how those first chapters would sound to me now that I had made it to the end of the book in a state of semi-comprehension. It's the book that taught me what reading and re-reading in philosophy are. That alone has been an invaluable, lifelong lesson. All through college and afterwards it was never out of my sight. I wanted it all, and I made the

1. Cavell, “An Audience for Philosophy,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), xxii.

contents of that book my lesson plan. For years I made it a point to see every movie even briefly discussed in it, read every critic he mentioned, see the work of the painters he discussed, and begin reading the philosophers he was in dialogue with. As with Stanley's writing in general, its impact is not only in what he writes himself but what he makes available and puts you in touch with.

So, when my college courses were boring me or irritating me, I re-read *The World Viewed*, and tracked down everything in the endnotes. The education I received from that one book is incalculable and took place over many years. There are, of course, the films themselves which the book introduced me to: the films of Bresson, Truffaut, Bergman, Antonioni, Howard Hawks, *Children of Paradise* (Carné), Astaire and Rogers, Godard, Chaplin, Keaton, and W. C. Fields, Terrence Malick, Carl Dreyer, Fellini, Jean Renoir, Alain Resnais, Hitchcock, Kubrick, Kurosawa, Welles, Chris Marker, Jean Vigo (whose *L'Atlante* [1934] is the source text for films of remarriage) and Murnau.

It was through this book that I first encountered the criticism of James Agee, Robert Warshow, Andre Bazin, Michael Fried, William Empson, Northrop Frye, Clement Greenberg, Annette Michelson, and the criticism as well as the poetry of Baudelaire, beginning with his great essay "The Painter of Modern Life," the basis for a pivotal chapter in the book introducing modernism. It was from this book that I first discovered the paintings of Manet, Courbet, Delacroix, Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski. And finally, though I needed to work myself up to it, I first began trying to read philosophers like Rousseau, Heidegger, Hume, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Marx. Of course, this is not to say that I would never have encountered these figures, or at least some of them, had I never read *The World Viewed*. But Stanley's writing gave me a kind of permission of access, somehow combined with a sense that these could be my own personal discoveries.

Part of what I mean by the "concept-determining status" of his writing as philosophy is that whatever philosophy was, or whatever reading philosophy was, it had to, just as a reading experience, demand and reward going back over it again and again. This also meant that the writing had to bear up under any possible pressure of interrogati-

on, of meaning, truth, relevance, seriousness, as well as the reader's demand for pleasure and delight as well as instruction. And since any writing presenting itself as philosophical or of high intellectual seriousness will also be encountered in a milieu subject to its specific forms of disappointment, even of fraudulence and fakery, for Stanley Cavell's writing to bear up under the weight of demands and promise I placed upon it, it had to be writing that could earn and keep the trust of a youth quick to disappointment (and feeling betrayed) by the representatives of intellectual life on offer that one encounters along the way. What this has meant for me is that philosophical writing that didn't place all these simultaneous demands on itself, I have forever afterwards found difficult to take seriously as philosophy.

So this is part of what I mean by its "concept-determining" role in my life. But I also mean that the questions and the writers he has made available to philosophy are for me definitional of the subject of philosophy.

A self-conscious task Stanley took upon himself, pretty much all his life, is that of making a place within philosophy, as studied or practiced in the universities, for a number of writers and texts, which just about everyone agrees are of some kind of greatness and importance, often even canonical, but which nonetheless occupy an uneasy place considered as an academic subject. There are many such writers—Kierkegaard, Emerson, Montaigne, Rousseau, Freud—who are points of reference in philosophy as well as literature, and who are difficult to accommodate institutionally, (thematically related to their different concerns with the difficulties in making oneself intelligible.) This is part of what Stanley means in a late essay of his ("The Wittgensteinian Event") by the "pedagogical recalcitrance of Wittgenstein's text": "In such a case, in an academic context, the existence of such writers raises the question: just what counts as teaching these texts, what is learning from them?"²

Here, in a deeply characteristic virtue of Stanley's, what would for others be a purely rhetorical question is in his hands taken perfectly seriously, and constructively. We will take this very question as our task, as readers, and as thinkers, and find ways to make progress on learning what teaching this text could mean. And one thing we will do at the beginning is look to the text itself to articulate its lesson of how it is

2. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 210.

to be read. If the text is fully serious, it will be committed in its meaningfulness everywhere, and if as readers we are as demanding on our own responsiveness as we are on the text, we will be instructed in how to read it. Simple as that, really. It just helps to be possessed of the mind and heart of Stanley Cavell when you're doing it. What his writing provides, in countless instances, is the kind of intellectual feat of both patience and brilliance that you wouldn't believe was possible until you have seen it done yourself. And once you have seen it done, writing of that depth of responsiveness, serious down to its very syllables, after that encounter nothing else will do really. Writing that falls short of that, whether philosophy or criticism, will simply seem anemic and unserious by comparison. Hence this is another part of what I mean by saying that Stanley's writing is for me paradigmatic of philosophy as such.

This is not a gathering of people who need to be introduced to the work of Stanley Cavell, so I may be permitted not to review his accomplishments here and now. But people come to the writing of Stanley Cavell from a remarkable variety of directions, something which is itself one of his special accomplishments, and I would wager that no two people in this room have read all and only the same works by Stanley Cavell. So, this means that we don't all know the same things.

It is well known, for instance, that Stanley's work reflects on an astonishing variety of subjects, from Barbara Stanwyck to Descartes' *cogito*, but because his readers come from so many different places, they don't always know what is going on in the neighboring fields. So, for instance, those who primarily know his work on Wittgenstein, will be aware of his writing on Shakespeare, or film, or Thoreau, . . . and likewise, an admirer of his writing on Henry James or opera, will know that the author of these works is an important American philosopher, but may not be in a position to know just how crucial an interpreter of Wittgenstein he is, to go no further.

And so there may yet be point in underlining, even in this learned and distinguished company, the difference there is between (on the one hand) being, perhaps brilliantly eclectic and generous in one's intellectual sympathies, or taking an interest in Shakespeare or movies, and on the other hand, producing *these* works, writing unsurpassable books like *The World Viewed*, *Pursuits of Happiness*, and *Contesting Tears*, as well as the body of writing on Shakespeare first collected in his book *Di-*

sowning Knowledge. These are not just any books about film or about Shakespeare. Nor are they simply a gifted philosopher's reflections on literature or film. These are books that both absorb and respond to the wealth of writing on film or literature that precedes him, some of it, after all, by some of the most gifted writers or scholars in the language, and yet these are books which manage to raise the level of intellectual ambition for these topics and achieve something that future writing on them is now forever to be measured by.

As he writes near the beginning of *The Claim of Reason*, "A measure of the quality of a new text is the quality of the texts it arouses."³ Well, for devoted readers and writers like me, aroused, raised, and cheered by writing of Stanley Cavell, a measure, a standard like that really puts us on the spot. Which is where we belong, I suppose. I am personally and profoundly grateful for his example and for his friendship these many years, for providing so many points of entry to the subject of philosophy, so many ways in; and for providing so many ways forward.

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