

4. Encountering Cavell

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I first came across Stanley Cavell's writing in the fall of 1974 in a senior seminar in the philosophy of mind at Middlebury College, co-taught by Stanley Bates and Timothy Gould. We spent most of the term reading Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* and P. F. Strawson's *Individuals*—books that at that time, before the widespread reception of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, Putnam-style functionalism, and central state identity theory, still counted as contemporary philosophy of mind. It was then felt by Bates and Gould, I conjecture, that something more lively and something having to do with subjectivity might be order. Both of them had been Ph.D. students with Cavell at Harvard, and so we turned to "Knowing and Acknowledging."

I had already read J. L. Austin's "A Plea for Excuses" and "Other Minds" with Bates a semester earlier, so the ground for my reception of Cavell was somewhat prepared by Austin's enterprise of attending to what we would really say when, in a spirit of diagnosing philosophical confusions. But Cavell's essay was different. He did suggest that the problem of other minds was somehow confused or ill-formed. But he also tried to figure out seriously how someone, anyone, might honestly and genuinely say and mean that he or she can never know, never really know, whether another human being is in pain. The answer turned out to be that one *could* really say and mean this if, but only if, one had failed to acknowledge another person, or failed, as it were, to acknowledge human existence *in* another. And *that*, in turn, could happen, if but only if one had fallen out of human relationship with the other and into narcissism, alienation, or what Cavell called (I was soon to learn) avoidance. In a yet further turn, that fall is not a simple mistake or confusion that can readily be avoided if one is simply careful with oneself. It is instead something that is all too liable and likely to happen to anyone. (This is the line of thinking that Cavell came to call, in *The Claim of Reason*, the truth of skepticism.) Partly this liability is a function of modern social

conditions, where there are radically differentiated and mutually opaque forms of labor and hence of social stance and identity. In *The World Viewed*, which we went on to read in the seminar, Cavell refers to the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape

subjectivity and metaphysical isolation—a wish for the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another. [...] At some point the unhinging of our consciousness from the world interposed our subjectivity between us and our presentness to the world. Then our subjectivity became what is present to us, individuality became isolation.¹

As a late adolescent, studying philosophy in relative social seclusion and uncertain of what would come next, I was certainly ready to recognize myself in this picture. Partly this liability is a function of ego formation as such, as one comes to take up a discursively structured point of view on things and to engage in claim-making activity only under the scrutiny and corrections of others, so that one both desperately wishes to please others (the grownups) and desperately wishes to acquire a form of authority in claim-making performance that is absolute, metaphysically immune to challenge. (This is one of the sources of Lear's avoidance of the claims of others, especially Cordelia, on his own emotional responsiveness that is to him both unruly and frightening, as I soon came to learn from Cavell's "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*.")

And yet, however socially, psychoanalytically, and even metaphysically formed and persistent the experience of isolation, the wish for presentness, and the reactive temptation to avoidance are, it is also not true that nothing can be done about them. In "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," as well as somewhat less explicitly in "Must We Mean What We Say?" and "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy,"—texts to which I soon turned during that epochal fall of 1974—Cavell argues for the possibility and importance of honesty in giving voice critically to one's difficult responses to things (other people, modern works of art), including giving voice to

1. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 21-22.

one's intimately entangled attractions, aversions, confusions, and bursts of identification. He contrasts the achievement of attentive critical voice with inattentive standings on dogmatic formula for defining the essence of poetry on the parts of Cleanth Brooks (poetry is inherently unparaphrasable) and Yvor Winters (poetry is necessarily paraphrasable). Both Brooks and Winters, he suggests, are defensively, reactively, and fruitlessly insisting on their respective formulas as a way of both claiming authority and avoiding coming to full terms with the unsettling details of specific pieces of difficult modern poetry. We can do better, Cavell suggests, if we avoid formulas for response and instead do the hard, patient, troubling, but also rewarding work of focusing on details in specific poems that either attract or repel us and then trying to figure out how and why these attractions and aversions happen. (In 1981 I learned from *Pursuits of Happiness* that a marriage could be built and rebuilt, day after day, through a kind of mutual criticism, improvisation, and wit via intimate attentiveness to one another and that that could be fun.)

Cavell goes on in "Aesthetic Problems" to extend this thought to philosophy as well, or at least to the kind of philosophy that appeals to what we say. Pattern and reason-giving are possible, and we may hope for agreement from others, but proof on the model of mathematics is never in view. In a justly famous passage, he sums up his conception of how the critic, the artist, and the philosopher might do their work in a humanly possible and plausible way.

The problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways. Then his work outlasts the fashions and arguments of a particular age. That is the beauty of it. [...] [P]hilosophy, like art, is, and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have. All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own.²

2. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 94, 96.

This passage—and the conception of philosophy as critical-expressive-persuasive activity that aims at (but never fully achieves) fullness of attention to the difficult phenomena of one’s life with others that it expresses—has been the lodestar of my entire philosophical career. Together with some related passages about modernism in the Foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, it was the basis for my personal statement in applying to graduate school about what I wanted to do in philosophy. My 1981 Ph.D. dissertation, written at Chicago under Ted Cohen (another Cavell student) explored and defended this view, in arguing (by way of critical readings of major philosophical texts by Descartes, Frege, Davidson, and Wittgenstein) that we are always in pursuit of self-reconciliation and community and that this pursuit might most fruitfully be carried on critically, expressively, and conversationally rather than by trying to grasp vainly after proofs. In *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell characterizes his “conception of philosophy as the achievement of the unpolemical, of the refusal to take sides in metaphysical positions, of my quest to show that those are not useful sides but needless constructions”³—as in the constructed formulas of Brooks and Winters. When followed out carefully (as it can be), the somewhat odd grammar of this sentence makes it clear that the quest to show the emptiness of dogmatic formulas and to do something else instead is itself something to be achieved. I have found myself working, early and late, from within the grip of this quest.

Along the way I got to know Cavell personally, first at an evening at Ted Cohen’s coop apartment in Chicago, where Cavell met with a group of somewhat starstruck students that included Stephen Melville, Paul Gudel, Mary Deveraux, Jeff Wieand, and Danny Herwitz. Still myself somewhat under the spell of a reading of Wittgenstein as some kind of communitarian—a reading I now regard as mistaken, in offering only another distorting summary formula that betrays the richness and expressive ambivalence of the text—I asked Cavell why he didn’t take the private language argument to point to a more Hegelian conception of language, thought, and social life as all necessarily interrelated, with Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, say, as the fundamental object of study. (Perhaps only a graduate student would or should say something like this.) Gently, but memorably, he replied, “Sometimes a man’s just got to

3. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 22.

get up, shake the dust off his shoes, and get out of town.” (It was at this time that Cavell was working out his interest in Emersonian aversiveness, the positive flip side, as it were, of avoidance.) Later on there were some six or eight conferences (Penn State, Atlanta, Bloomington, Boston, Edinburgh, and a few others), where there were group dinners or lunches that included Ted Cohen, Stanley Bates, Tim Gould, Paul Guyer, Jay Bernstein, and Charles Altieri, among others. Cavell was unfailingly interested in and attentive to whatever I might be up to, despite the like demands of others on his attention that he repaid equally well. His genuineness and generosity of interest in and attention to others were perhaps his dominant character traits, along with his fierce intelligence and extraordinary ear. He supplied a two-sentence blurb for my 2008 book *Literature, Life, and Modernity* that is a masterpiece of insight, depth, and brevity. I could not then and could not now characterize my aims and (I hope) my achievements any better than he did in that brief remark.

As this rehearsal of influence and acquaintance makes clear, my philosophical work and much of the course of my life would not have been possible without Cavell’s continuing presence in it, enabled and mediated by Gould, Bates, and Cohen (my teachers, his students) along with his writing. Cavell’s conception of philosophy as an ongoing, open-ended, never fully dischargeable task of achieving responsiveness and responsibility, where moves can be made, insight and intimacies can be achieved, and fun can be had, if we are but attentive enough, but where finality is never in view, has been central to everything I do. I wish it were more central to the discipline and to our general culture. But perhaps we, or at least some of us, can still hope and work for that.