

6. For My Teacher, Stanley Cavell

ALICE CRARY

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.

I am honored to be here, with members of the Cavell family, with friends and with colleagues, to celebrate the life and work of Stanley Cavell, to whom I owe inestimably large debts of gratitude and whom I remember with the greatest affection and admiration.

Cavell's role in my life was that of a philosophical parent. He is well known to have held that "philosophy is the education of grownups,"¹ and the sort of parenting I am talking about involved opening the door of philosophy for my young adult self. This was not a matter of induction into a theoretical research program of the type that then already dominated academic philosophy. Cavell's way was to prompt students to confront and interrogate our own intellectual responses, leading us to ask "why we do what we do, judge as we judge,"² and positioning us to think for ourselves. This is a demanding pedagogical enterprise, and Cavell devoted singular amounts of time and energy to supporting the young thinkers around him. What I am going to recount is the story of two extraordinary things that he did as my teacher, circumstances all the more arresting in that I was not officially his student.

I first encountered Cavell at Harvard in the late nineteen eighties when I was an undergraduate. He had then already been one of the world's most admired and beloved philosophers for some decades, so there's nothing surprising about the fact that I was intrigued and that I enrolled in a course he was offering on Emerson, diligently scribbling down notes while he lectured about things like aversion to conformity and self-

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.

2. *Ibid.*

reliance. Although I didn't then have any clear sense of what it might be to bring these ideas to bear on one's own life, I felt an excitement I couldn't account for and wanted to hear more. I was, however, too timid to approach him or to go to his office hours. My professors generally struck me as otherworldly beings—not an unusual experience for a student from a non-academic background—and, in light of the simultaneously jubilantly playful and pointedly serious manner in which he carried off his extreme breadth of learning, Cavell was especially terrifying. Especially beguiling and therefore especially terrifying. I didn't ask him to advise my undergraduate thesis, even though it was dedicated in substantial part to his work. Yet, when it came time for the oral defense of the thesis, for which he was roped in as an examiner, he took pains to tell jokes and introduce asides with an eye to putting me at my ease. When, having received my A.B., I took a teaching job at an international school in Ecuador, he encouraged me to apply to Ph.D. programs in Philosophy and wrote in support of my applications. And, when, because my partner—Nathaniel—was at Harvard Medical School, I took a leave from my Ph.D. program at the University of Pittsburgh to spend an academic year back at Harvard, Cavell hired me as his research assistant and also as one of the teaching fellows for his iconic Moral Perfectionism lecture course. *That* is a quick overview of my earliest interactions with Cavell, and, although I would have an enormous amount to be grateful for if this were all there was to say, it is merely the backdrop for the more remarkable episodes I want to relate.

I left Pittsburgh two years before I finished my Ph.D. Through no fault of my own, I could no longer stay there, and the circumstance was the occasion of the only seriously unhappy stretch of time in my life. With an eye to getting me out of Pittsburgh, Nathaniel arranged to do a fellowship in public health at Harvard, and together we got positions as resident tutors at Mather House. In theory this was an extremely satisfactory setup for me to finish the Ph.D., but in practice things were not good. I was no longer able to work. My standard method involved an exercise of visualization in which I mentally map out a set of conceptual connections, and then, as it were, walk around the relevant space until I feel confident that I know it well. But I had been shaken in my ability to confidently move among a set of concepts. I couldn't do it, and for at least a good part of a year I gave up the idea of a career in philosophy, hoping only to finish a tolerable dissertation. Not that I was inactive during this peri-

od. I was teaching and interacting with philosophy peers, and this included checking in with Cavell from time to time. But even with close friends I didn't talk much about what I was going through, and I wouldn't have dreamed of burdening Cavell. For his part, he was, in my experience, capable of merrily expectant silences, intended to draw out a partner in conversation. But he wasn't inclined to ask uninvited questions. Nonetheless, he was one of very few people in my life who not only registered that I was not the same person I had been but also openly acknowledged that they knew this. Cavell was of course aware that this gesture of acknowledgment was anything but ethically insignificant—he is, after all, the philosopher who wrote the book about such matters³—and, far from shying away from the demands it imposed on him as my friend and teacher, he embraced them, finding ways to help me build back to my self-respect.

Once, when I was at my lowest, I met him in the late morning at the diner across Beacon Street from his house, where he used to meet students and colleagues, the Busy Bee.⁴ We mostly talked about the sorts of things we in those days mostly talked about—writing, philosophical texts we had in common, mutual friends, feminism, politics, literature, movies, and so on—but I had been working up my courage to say something to him, and I did finally manage, with great effort, to utter something like: “I need someone to tell me that they believe that I can do this.”

He showed his appreciation of my words by responding to me in his slow, winning manner. “Any day,” he said, “any day.”

After a moment, we went on speaking of other things. But he meant what he said to me, and he lived up to it.

They say no good deed goes unpunished, and my second anecdote does nothing to disconfirm this bit of conventional wisdom. Back when I was his research assistant, in 1994, I had asked Cavell whether he would officiate at a ceremony celebrating the relationship between Nathaniel and me. At the age of thirteen, I had recognized the label “feminist” as fitting my image of my own aspirations, and—taking my cue from a vision of the gendered social world that I won't discuss here—I had de-

3. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, especially Part II. See also “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 220–245 and *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

4. I am indebted to David Cavell for reminding me of the name of this establishment.

terminated never to marry. When I read Cavell's work on marriage, his distinction between the institution and the ideal of marriage made a strong impression on me.⁵ Even before I had come across the phrase "commitment ceremony," his writings on these topics had suggested to me the possibility of a non-institutional fête in honor of the ideal. So, if Nathaniel and I were to have such a gathering, I reasoned, Cavell was the only person who could rightly preside. During the difficult period after I left Pittsburgh, I simply let the idea drop, but, when things again became easier—a circumstance for which I am significantly indebted to Cavell—I revived the plan. Cavell himself reports that he "gladly accepted [my] request that [he] take on the role of leading what has come to be called a commitment ceremony,"⁶ and, although that accords with my memory of events, I remembered being awed by how seriously he thought over our invitation. In 2000, Nathaniel and I had moved to Manhattan to take up our respective first assistant professorships, his at Cornell Medical School and mine at the New School for Social Research. When I again approached Cavell about our idea for a ceremony, he suggested that I come up to Boston to discuss it with him, which I of course did, though not without a little fear and trembling.

Nathaniel and I ultimately invited friends and colleagues to the grounds of a country house of Nathaniel's parents, in upstate New York, for September 15, 2001.⁷ Four days before our gathering, planes flew into the World Trade Centers, just a few blocks north of the Battery Park City apartment in which we then lived. Even as, with thousands of others, we were trying to make our way on foot west and north of the towers, we decided that, if at all possible, we would go ahead with our plans. Although some friends and family members who had been planning to fly to New York were unable to join us, the party—which included, in addition to a good number of philosophers and doctors from Boston, more or less the entire philosophy faculty of the New School for Social Research—wound up being bigger, not smaller, than expected, swelling to more than two hundred guests. It was not a day on which anyone had scruples about bringing an extra friend, neighbor, or family member. Cavell him-

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

6. Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 519.

7. Within *Little Did I Know*, Cavell describes the ceremony as having taken place in Western Massachusetts. Although this is an error, it is an understandable one. The property at which the ceremony took place is in Hillsdale, NY, which is very close to the Massachusetts border, and the inn in which we put the Cavells up is indeed in Massachusetts.

self later said he had doubts about his performance as our master of ceremonies. Nothing that he of course could not say “I pronounce you husband and wife,” he said that afterward he berated himself “for not having been nimble enough to provide a closing statement involving all present [something that] would have achieved what Austin calls ‘up-take’ in a performative utterance.”⁸ Cavell’s qualms notwithstanding, his conduct at the event was, as I have it memory, brilliantly magisterial, making the proceedings seem utterly natural and authoritative, and Cathleen Cavell was there with him, the two of them smashingly elegant, lending their effortless grace and dignity to the whole affair. Nathaniel and I had no doubt that the effect we wanted—that our union had been given the imprimatur of collective recognition—had been attained.

Cavell died at a time at which, with the rise of hate-driven, far right movements in the United States and elsewhere, political discourse and practice are becoming more sinister and violent. I know I am not alone among the philosophers assembled here in believing that it is now urgent to identify and employ resources for effective critique. Nor I am alone in holding that it is imperative to be willing to turn on and examine the philosophical tools we have inherited, leaving room for the possibility that we may need to reject some of them as unhelpful or even as themselves ideological. This exercise of self-scrutiny is the thing that Cavell taught most fervently, consistently underlining its importance for democratic society.⁹ I close with my boundless gratitude to him, not only for inviting me into a fellowship of socially engaged philosophers, but also for helping me to overcome a blow to my self-conception that once made this philosophical life seem out of reach—and, indeed, for showing with such virtuosity that, far from being incompatible with joy, the seriousness of the endeavor is one of life’s most glorious and happiest pursuits.

8. *Ibid.*, 520.

9. For more on this topic, see Nancy Bauer, Alice Crary, and Sandra Laugier, “Stanley Cavell and the American Contradiction,” in *The Stone*, in *The New York Times* (July 2, 2018), <https://nyti.ms/2Nh1cgg>.