

## 7. Stanley Cavell, with Time

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*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.*

Let me start by saying how significant it is for me to take part in this conference commemorating and celebrating Stanley Cavell. I am grateful to Cathleen Cavell and Richard Moran for this opportunity, not only to speak, but mainly to listen to dear friends, friends whose companionship was indelibly marked by our common love for Stanley, by the admiration for his thinking, and by the inspiration and sustenance he provided for our own work.

What I will say will be inflected by the way Stanley touched my life and work. I must apologize therefore for having to speak, in the short and precious time I have, also a bit about myself. As I wrote these remarks I thought that I will most likely not be the only one to choose to speak of the ideal, the paradigm of the unity of person and thought that is Stanley Cavell. It is what was so striking to me when I first encountered him; it also became central to my dissertation project with him, and it remains to this day that through which I think of his continuous presence in my concerns with philosophy.

My dissertation bore everywhere distinct signs of this fascination with the coming together of the individual and universal that Stanley exemplified and thematized, this even though I availed myself of Harvard's "three papers option," writing, instead of a proper thesis, separate essays on Rousseau, Kant, and Wittgenstein. I can trace my concern with the intersection of the biographical and the political in Rousseau to the impact of a passage close to the opening of *The Claim of Reason* where Cavell presents Rousseau's writing as "a way to use the self as access to the self's society" (26). "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy" was the inspiration for my se-

cond paper on the universal voice in Kant's account of aesthetic judgment, in which what is most intimately mine, that is, meaning which manifests itself in feeling, is also that through which I can speak for all. Surprising as it was, especially for me, my work on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* eventually also gravitated to the truth of solipsism as that uniqueness of the "I" encapsulated in what one could call the logical expression of the autobiographical: "Life and World are one," or "The World is my world."

As it was nearing its completion, Stanley referred to my dissertation, in one of our regular meetings in the Chinese restaurant on Beacon Street, as my "three headed monster." This reference to the guardian of Hades, was, I take it, his witty and affectionate way of indicating both the disparity between its different parts, and because of that, its potential to be further formed. I would not exaggerate if I said that my work, conducted under Stanley's supervision, absorbed without my quite knowing how, his subterranean influence, and was since, material for about twenty-five more years of thinking and writing, followed by his attentive responsiveness, and then only partially represented in three books on Wittgenstein, Rousseau, and Kant into which the three papers evolved.

Heading back for Israel, upon the completion of my thesis, in the summer of 1992, I hoped for a new beginning but also dreaded the prospect of looking for an academic position, that is of justifying, upon returning home, my departure from the procedures of philosophy I was taught there before I left for Harvard. My return was eased by Stanley's visit to give the Harvard University press lectures in Jerusalem in November of that same year. Earlier discussions of the intersection of the personal and the philosophical could still fall under what Cavell calls "abstract autobiography," or "the autobiography of a species." There was also, for sure, the endlessly thought-provoking "autobiography of companions," the exploration of the conditions of film out of the memory of the experience of films, in *The World Viewed*. But, in these lectures, later published as *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, the impression of the utterly concrete universality demanded by the autobiographical could not be missed. It is the impact of these lectures that led me to conceive of continuing the work I did on Rousseau in the thesis, with a consideration of his last autobiography, the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* as a work of Cavellian "moral perfectionism."

What moved me in writing on the *Reveries* was in part the need to account for the dark side of representativeness, suggested in the same passage of *The Claim of Reason* I already referred to: “You will have to decide,” Cavell writes, “about [Rousseau’s] bouts of apparent insanity. Are they merely psychological problems? [...] Or are they expressions of grief that society should conduct itself as it does? Not grief for himself, but for society, which willfully denies knowledge of its own conspiracies, and not just those directed against him.”<sup>1</sup> The *Reveries* was Rousseau’s ultimate measure in the face of the unanimous agreement of society to reject him. It is thus an autobiography that Rousseau writes for himself alone, and which opens with the words: “Here I am then, alone on earth.” The time of writing, that is of the transfiguration of life in memory, is posthumous, after all has ended, making its truthful readability inescapably a matter of what I called “the afterlife of words.”

Cavell’s turn to autobiography in *A Pitch of Philosophy* became important for me in yet a different way. In the “Overture,” added to the lectures upon their publication, he relates how upon the occasion of his visit to Jerusalem, he read some essays of Gershom Scholem. He suggests the pertinence of Scholem’s concern with the power of the Jewish mystical tradition to regenerate modern spiritual existence, to his own questioning of the “potential regenerativeness of Emerson and Thoreau as thinkers.”<sup>2</sup> Each of the three chapters of the book was further introduced by an epigraph from one of Scholem’s essays. As Cavell puts it in the overture: “These epigraphs represent an entire mode of approaching aspects of matters I dwell on that is not directly or consecutively taken in my own text—matters of voice, ephemerality, the inexcusable, name, dedication, the latency of the self.”<sup>3</sup>

The epigraphs are from the essay “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” and so the mode of approaching matters, Cavell refers to in the quote just above, is not Scholem’s but Benjamin’s. After Benjamin’s death, Scholem’s friendship for him translated itself into the task of rescuing his writings for posterity, challenging his Marxist reception, and as it were guarding the afterlife of his writings. The epigraphs Cavell chose thus quoted Scholem, yet still referred further back to what I perceived as the

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1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 27.

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

3. *Ibid.*, xiii.

regenerative potential of Benjamin's writings. I was struck by how the son of Jewish immigrants to America was also relating himself thereby to two sides of Jewish existence in the twentieth century, to the one who, in the late twenties became a Zionist and established himself in Jerusalem, and the one who remained in Europe and took his life after a failed attempt to cross the border into Spain, fleeing the Nazi invasion of France.

I will not hide that these two sides were on my mind in part probably through my early, maybe too early, knowledge that my father's parents also tried in these fateful years to cross the French border, and upon being captured were sent to their deaths. My father through many detours and changes of names, later narrated in his memoirs, made his way to Israel. And my full Hebrew name "Elchanan" is made of the names of my grandparents "Elisheva" and "Hans."

Given the importance of Jerusalem as the setting of *A Pitch of Philosophy*, I should mention, in a different spirit, that a few years later, upon my invitation, Stanley spoke to an auditorium filled with young and attentive students at Tel Aviv University. I think that it is not only out of local patriotism that I cherish how he later referred with noticeable excitement and enthusiasm to our dinner with some of these students on a sandy beach of the Mediterranean. Tel Aviv became in his mind, I would like to believe, another half of the place, which he knew only as Jerusalem.

Further reading Benjamin, led me to tell Stanley, when we met next, in the same Chinese restaurant on Beacon Street, that I think I found *my* Emerson. He replied unforgettably: "Lucky Walter." Under certain conditions, that is, when the right person says that, it is enough to send you on your way for life. But, one shouldn't forget, that paired with the richness of Stanley's mind, as he endlessly absorbed and incorporated matters small and large, his recurring gesture was to recount his philosophical trajectory, always relating every new departure to its sources, insisting as it were on a philosophical diet as a necessity of the unity of a life in philosophy (I say this thinking of Nancy Bauer's so precise diagnosis of the predicament of being a student of Stanley caught between his love of what Stanley loves and the need to find for himself his own objects of devotion).

In taking on Benjamin as a departure from the circle of concerns that I relate to Cavell's immediate influence on my work, I searched for signs of continuity: for

instance in a short and inspiring essay he wrote on the occasion of the English translation of the first volume of Benjamin's *Selected Writings*, "Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities." I was further encouraged by conversations with Stanley on such parallels, not only between his *The World Viewed* and Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, but also between his exploration of marriage and melodrama in film and Benjamin's essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, as well as on the central presence of *Hamlet* in his book on the German baroque mourning play.

It was as I was sitting next to Stanley at Alice Crary's wedding reception, of which she so movingly told us about earlier today, that I heard of his investment in reading, from beginning to end, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. This was a prelude to the writing of his own autobiography, to his taking up the incredible project described in the following terms: "I would have to show that telling the accidental, anonymous, in a sense posthumous, days of my life is the making of philosophy, however minor or marginal, impure, which means to show that those days can be written, in some sense are to be called to be written philosophically."<sup>4</sup>

Opening again *Little Did I Know* to prepare for this memorial conference, I was drawn to the book's opening moves, in particular to its astounding first paragraph beginning—"The catheterization of my heart will no longer be postponed"—and ending with—"We must actually look at what is going on inside the heart."<sup>5</sup> I soon gave up my plans to conclude these remarks with a short reading of the opening entry of these *Excerpts from Memory*, in part because (not for the first time in reading Stanley Cavell), I was stunned by the dense, so delicate yet so exact, weave of meaning, that unfolds in these opening pages.

Instead of the reading I envisaged, I will therefore end with a reflection on the specific character of this language, that is of its thoughtfulness, and speculate on its possible relation to the idea of writing a life accompanied by philosophy. Stanley Cavell thinks in language, which is no more and no less than following the implications of the knowledge that words are needed to express thoughts. The commitment of thought to language comes in different modes: it is evident in the importance Cavell attributes to ordinary language philosophy. And in the register of the voice, of telling,

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

5. *Ibid.*, 1.

of recounting, as well as of the anecdotal that is omnipresent in his memoirs. Importantly, the gift of storytelling, so evident in his narration, is an inheritance that Stanley traces to his father. But here I want to recall other moments, just as Cavellian, crossroads in the text, where the line of the story seems to be traversed by different threads, and through their interweaving, raised to partake in another plane of meaning. Such latitude in meaning, even as one is going on to tell the uncertain gains and losses of a life advancing in time, cannot be delivered or freely improvised, but must be written. (Indeed, the return to what was written day after day, necessary to create this weave is the allowable exception to the pre-compositional pact that makes for the daily rhythm of beginnings and endings in the memoirs.)

The opening entry is in that respect, the first, exemplary moment, where an obstacle in the path of life, a thoroughly real, anxiety-provoking contingency is transmuted into a “departure in [...] writing.”<sup>6</sup> But departure, entry, beginning, no longer postponing, become part of a pattern crafted by the threads of directness and delay, immediacy and detour, invasions and defenses, waiting and precipitation. And the forming of that pattern is not external to what it takes for Cavell to “write [his] way into and through the anxiety.”<sup>7</sup> It stands for work to be repeated in addressing “accidents avoided and embraced, strangers taken to heart or neglected, talents imposed or transfigured, malice insufficiently rebuked, love inadequately acknowledged.”<sup>8</sup> I would even chance to say, that it is essential to achieving the “balance between remembering and forgetting”<sup>9</sup> that Stanley speaks of in the last line of the first entry. It is that form of meaning in which remembering, as difficult as the memory is, or comes, is redeemed in being dissolved in the writing of the surroundings that are its original home.

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6. *Ibid.*, 2.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 5