

14. Stanley Cavell at Amherst College

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In February of 2000, Stanley Cavell came to Amherst College to present two public lectures as the John C. McCloy '16 Professor of American Institutions. (I had nominated him for the lectureship the previous year, and he had been approved by a College committee and the president of the College at the time, Tom Gerety, who was himself a legal philosopher.)

It was a big deal. In the fall, the lecturer had been Ronald Dworkin. Others who had lectured through these early years of the lecture included such luminaries as Martha Nussbaum and George Kateb. (The first McCloy lecturer had been Fred Korematsu, who had unsuccessfully sued the U.S. government during World War II to end the Japanese internment program. Korematsu's invitation had been a sort of historical reparation, since John McCloy, for whom the professorship had been named, had directed the internment camp program for FDR, famously saying, when asked about its constitutionality, "Compared to my country, the Constitution is just a piece of paper.")

Stanley gave two lectures, "Night and Day: Heidegger and Thoreau," on February 10, and "Passionate and Performative Utterance: Extending Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*," on February 17. Both of these lectures, in modified form, eventually found their way into print in Stanley's *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Harvard University Press, 2005) as "Passionate and Performative Utterances" and "Thoreau Thinks of Ponds, and Heidegger of Rivers."

My intention here is not to discuss the substance of these two major essays. Instead, I want to tell two stories about Stanley and his character as both a thinker and person, occasioned by the events of those lectures.

Stanley presented these lectures in the Converse Hall Assembly Room, also known as the Red Room, one of the College's larger gather places, an amphitheater

that usually holds about 200 people maximum, but which, for both of Stanley's lectures, was filled to overflowing, with people hanging out at the room's multiple entrances to listen in.

For the first lecture, on Heidegger and Thoreau, the attention of the audience was total, and Stanley persisted in answering questions for some forty-five minutes after the lecture, before I finally insisted (as his faculty host) that we needed to head out to a dining hall on campus where there was a dinner in his honor, with about forty members of the faculty from Amherst and other Five College schools across various disciplines in attendance, each one of them wanting a chance to speak with him. He barely got to eat his meal that evening. But at long last, after hours in which he had been gracious and generous with his responsiveness to his interlocutors—some of whom were more than interesting and engaging, some less so—I finally was able to bring the festivities to an end, and we left the dining hall to walk back to the inn where he was lodged (then called the Lord Jeffrey Amherst Inn, but subjected to a recent and largely welcome name change, given the genocidal inclinations of the original Lord Jeff).

As we went into the night, my head was buzzing a bit at the sheer thrill of the event, one of those major intellectual events some of us live and hope for. But before we had walked more than a few yards toward the hotel, Stanley stopped dead in his tracks, grabbed me by the arm, turned me toward him so he could get my full attention, and asked, "Tom, was that all right?"

I was floored. Here was one of the most justly celebrated living philosophers, who had just delivered himself of hours of stimulating and deep insights into two crucially important thinkers, and he sincerely was concerned that he may not have adequately performed, may not have fully and clearly expressed himself, may not have done as well as he might have. I thought to myself, if Stanley Cavell suffers from such self-doubt, such levels of what some call "intellectual imposter syndrome," what hope is there for mere mortals like the rest of us (like me)? But upon reflection, it seemed to me that Stanley wasn't expressing self-doubt so much as he was expressing his deep sense of the inadequacy of all of our communications, all of our language never quite reaching where it aims, a consistent and deep Cavellian theme. But also, a pos-

ture that has as its price a constant self-questioning, a constant self-doubting, or self-checking.

The following week Stanley returned, and again delivered himself of a major lecture, this time revisiting the themes of Austin, the philosopher who, when Stanley was a graduate student at Harvard, had delivered the William James lectures, that eventually were published as *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, 1955, 1962) and thus changed the course of Stanley's life. The major difference in the reception of that lecture is that rather than a large public dinner, a smaller, more intimate dinner was held at the president of the College's home.

Now, a little bit of context. That previous fall, as I mentioned, Ronald Dworkin had been the McCloy professor, delivering a lecture entitled "Do Values Conflict?" His lecture was fantastic, exploring a deep argument concerning intellectual and moral authority and its relationship to power, among other things, but what I remember most clearly is not the substance—it can be found in his subsequent book by that title—but his style of lecturing. He spoke at length without notes, in fully formed sentences and paragraphs, with clarity and precision. (I was later told that this was a signature style associated with Oxford and Cambridge University dons. I have no idea whether that is true.) After his lecture, a group of about twenty-five of us gathered at the president's home for a formal sit-down dinner. It was spectacular—waiters and waitresses with *hors d'oeuvres* on platters, a full bar, a multiple course meal—all a sign and seal of President Gerety's admiration for this prominent legal philosopher.

Upon arriving at the president's house this time, however, there was no sign of any such elaborate preparations. It turned out that the only faculty invited to the dinner were members of the philosophy department, along with myself and a visiting assistant professor of political theory in my department, about twelve of us all told. Indeed, there was no one tending bar—there was self-service for drinks and wine—nor was a table set for a meal. Instead, Tom Gerety greeted us at the door in open shirt and sweater (he had not attended the lecture), and showed us into what he called the library, a room to the side of the formal dining room, where TV trays were set up. We were invited to fill our plates from a buffet that had been set up in the dining room, and sit wherever we could find a seat, dragging our trays with us.

The food itself wasn't memorable—of course often College food wasn't—but there were elements of the dinner discussion that were. What I best remember is an assistant professor of philosophy button-holing Stanley to ask him if he had ever read this book that he, the young professor, had once read about performative locutions by a philosopher named Austin, because a lot of what Stanley was saying in his lecture seemed to be a lot like what Austin seemed to want to say. Maybe Stanley ought to read that book, he suggested. If Stanley liked, he'd send him the reference. Stanley sat there and nodded, and thanked the young professor for his advice.

The evening seemed to go along those general lines, with (fortunately?) few members of the philosophy department caring to engage Stanley in conversation. It was, mercifully, a brief evening. This time, as we were walking back to the inn, it was my turn to stop Stanley, having him turn to me so that I could express my apologies for what felt to me to be a deeply insulting and demeaning event. Stanley laughed. And then laughed some more. "Tom," he said, "Not to worry. I've experienced lots worse."

This was an illustration of something else—not Stanley's worry about an inability to overcome the problem of other minds, at the heart of his concern about communicating clearly in his Heidegger and Thoreau lecture—but his appreciation, based on hard experience, of the depth of the division between the analytic and Continental traditions in philosophy, and the difficulties someone like him constantly had to face when addressing a typical American philosophy department steeped in the analytic tradition, blissfully ignorant of anything beyond that narrow, oh so narrow, beam of light.

We returned to the inn, had a drink, and I walked home. Stanley went back to Brookline the next morning, and our friendship, at least, was more secure than ever. I would have later occasion to suggest (ironically) that he maybe would want to read Austin's *How to Do things with Words*. He would usually reply by suggesting that it may well be time for me to read "A Plea for Excuses."