

## 22. Encountering Cavell in the College Classroom: Four Undergraduate Experiences

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When I received the invitation from David LaRocca to contribute to this special issue of *Conversations*, to commemorate and celebrate Stanley Cavell's life and thought, I felt flummoxed, overwhelmed by the possibilities. There are so many different reasons I feel gratitude, deep gratitude, for Stanley, so many ways his writings and voice have left a profound mark on my intellectual development and career and even daily life. What text or moment or effect should I single out? Where to begin? Indeed, if I had not stumbled across *Must We Mean What We Say?* three years into graduate school, despairing, as I was at that time, of ever feeling at home in the academic world of literary studies (this was in the late '90s in the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania, where New Historicism was very much enjoying its heyday), I think there's a good chance that I would never have finished my Ph.D. I had great respect for my teachers and peers, but as hard as I tried (and I did try very hard; after all, it felt like the very possibility of a career was at stake), I could not see myself reflected in their scholarly interests or outlooks.

After reading "Knowing and Acknowledging" for the first time, however, I *felt* or intuited, even if I did not yet fully comprehend, what had been missing in the first few years of my graduate training (the self, voice, acknowledgment), and it was as though I could, for the first time, glimpse my own reflection, recognize *myself* or some *self* I would want to be, in the voice and words of a published scholar: in Stanley Cavell's voice. Without this experience of recognition and acknowledgment, I doubt I

would have stayed in the game (for graduate school had come to feel like merely a game). In a very literal sense, then, without Stanley's writings in my life, I don't believe I would be getting invitations to contribute anything at all to any scholarly journals whatsoever. Reading Stanley on acknowledgment, and in doing so, receiving the gift of acknowledgment itself, is what made it possible for me to finish graduate school (to even want to finish it). In the end, I wrote a dissertation, inspired by his example, on Wittgenstein's notion of physiognomy, and somehow, with that degree in hand, ended up landing the position I now hold, as a Professor in the English Department at Williams College, where I teach courses in "philosophy and literature" (some of them, happily, on Cavell!). Reason enough, don't you think, to feel deep, deep gratitude?

When I received David's invitation to write something for this commemorative issue, this particular story about my intellectual and professional indebtedness to Stanley is what first flashed to mind. And quickly, many others followed. But it didn't take long (just a good night's sleep) for me to realize what I really wanted to do with this invitation: to pass it along to others, in particular, to the students I had taught in my undergraduate courses on Cavell. And so, that's what I've done.

Every few years, I teach a course that is basically an introduction to Cavell. It goes by various names: once, I called it "Ordinary Language and Literary Theory," another year I called it "Contemporary Literature and Ordinary Language," and most recently (Spring 2018), I called it "Wittgenstein and Literary Studies." We read a lot of different things in this course. A lot of late Wittgenstein, of course, and J. L. Austin too. Texts by Cora Diamond, Stephen Mulhall, Toril Moi, Sarah Beckwith, and Naomi Scheman make appearances as well (along with many others; too many to name). But the heart and soul of the class (its *raison d'être*) is Cavell.

In his editorial invitation, David asked contributors to this special issue to consider "how Stanley's work lives on, and how he and his work have given us life." I've already suggested how his work has given *me* life, but I can think of no better way to show how Stanley's work lives on (and how his work promises to live on, well into the future) than by providing a venue for some of my Williams students to describe the transformative effect reading Stanley has had on them ... how his work has given *them* "life."

My Spring 2018 section of “Wittgenstein and Literary Studies” was full of especially amazing, bright, intellectually adventurous students. It was a joy to teach, and teaching Cavell over the years to undergraduates, seeing how deeply he can touch and transform new generations of readers, is one of the clearest testaments to the inexhaustible vitality and ongoing importance of his work. For this piece, I invited four students whom I knew were especially deeply affected by Cavell’s work during this seminar. Two of them are philosophy majors, but none of them, I believe, intends to pursue philosophy at the graduate school level. When I emailed them to ask if they might be interested in contributing to this commemorative issue, all four of them immediately jumped at the opportunity. Like me, they feel deep gratitude to and for Cavell, and they were delighted to have this opportunity to share some of that appreciation with others.

I think—I hope—that Stanley would have enjoyed reading these four personal accounts of young thinkers and readers encountering his writings and voice for the first time. On behalf of these four students, and on behalf of the many students I’ve taught at Williams over the years who have been transformed and given life by their encounter with your writings, thank you, Stanley.

BERNIE RHIE

### **Isabel Andrade, '18**

The morning after Donald J. Trump’s election to president our college felt like a funeral home. We spoke in hushed voices and whispered our condolences. Over the next few months, this pain turned into anger, the stillness into uproar. Our campus was on edge with growing racial tensions and widespread distrust. At the time, my peers and I thought that the best response to a rising wave of racism and misogyny was to wield our intellectual strength against bigoted theories and justifications, bringing to light their inconsistencies and falsehoods. This was the context in which I first read Cavell.

In “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Cavell reflects on the philosopher who “begins with a full appreciation of the decisively significant facts that I may be suffering and no one else is, and that no one (else) may know (or care?).”<sup>1</sup> However, instead of pursuing these facts, the issue becomes *deflected* into the language of philosophical skepticism as the philosopher delves into questions of whether we can have the same suffering. Cora Diamond describes deflection as “what happens when we are moved from the appreciation, or attempt at appreciation, of a difficulty of reality [experiences that are hard to get one’s mind around, painful or astonishing in their inexplicability] to a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity.”<sup>2</sup>

This notion of “deflection” has helped me understand myself and my community better. I have started noticing how sometimes we deflect from feelings of hurt, separateness, or powerlessness into arguments about structures of oppression and hierarchies of power. Sometimes that deflection provides a bird’s eye view, helping us see structures at play which are unavailable to us when we just focus on the particular individuals that are here and now. However, we sometimes forget that this is but one possible perspective, and confuse our reality with the maps we’ve created of that reality.

Cavell writes that the ordinary language philosopher seeks to “discover the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to his condition.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of seeing people as just devices for putting forward ideas which we can abstract and analyze, Cavell shifts focus towards the particular person and the context in which she is expressing herself. For me, Cavell’s writing is a call to sympathetically inhabit the positions of those I disagree with, a call to come into an argument not with the goal of disparaging and refuting, but instead, seeking to understand the complexity of the other.

During debates and arguments, we often forget the humanity of those we disagree with, and we also forget our own human vulnerabilities. Under particular circumstances, certain modes of thought and ways of seeing the world can take a hold of us and grip us. At times, our over-reliance on argumentation is a way in which we may make unavailable to ourselves what it is to be human. This, I believe, is why Ca-

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1. Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 247.

2. Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no. 2 (2003): 12.

3. Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” 240.

vell promoted “modes of criticism that [...] do not leave the critic imagining himself free of the faults he sees around him.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the most well-known phrases among young conservatives nowadays is “facts don’t care about your feelings,” a quote popularized by Ben Shapiro in his criticisms of current college culture. This disregard of feelings, particularly the feelings of those we disagree with, is prevalent across the political spectrum, and it is deepening divides within our communities. Cavell’s call to eschew the age-old opposition between emotion and reason is particularly applicable for us now. It is evident that facts alone cannot show us what we need in order to respond well to each other and our shared world.

### **Stephanie Brown, '20**

*“How does theory make you feel?”* This was one of the first questions I was asked in my class on Wittgenstein last semester. It was also not a question my past two years studying philosophy at Williams had prepared me to answer. In fact, no one had ever asked about how my classes made me feel. At Williams, I am pre-med and a philosophy and psychology double major, with aspirations of becoming a psychiatrist. Feelings have motivated every step along my academic path, yet they were something I had almost accidentally kept private, as my feelings about what I learned never seemed important. Needless to say, I was so excited to answer this question, and to finally have an outlet to explain how philosophy makes me feel so full of wonder and hope that sometimes I worry I might just explode.

So, there was my first answer to how theory made me feel: excited, excited about all the problems I feel theory could solve. Then also frustrated, at all the things I felt I couldn’t figure out yet. And then I realized something else: thinking about how using theory made me feel as though I, just me, had answers to the most important questions in the world. I realized that theory made me feel... powerful. And I felt that perhaps that is something I should question.

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4. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 175.

As someone who was bullied for most of my childhood and teenage years, along with coming from a house with an emotionally abusive father, I've sought a mixture of things in philosophy—the ability to help myself, the ability to help others, and power. I never recognized my own search for power and control in my philosophical practice until that moment, when I was asked how theory made me feel. Until then, I had disguised my desire for power with my desire to help others.

When I read Cavell's "Knowing and Acknowledging," I saw myself in the skeptic's search for power, and I saw the danger that lay within it. In the separateness and fear, the acute loneliness of our private feelings, I recognized myself, my family, my friends, and my professors. The skeptic's loneliness feels like powerlessness which, in turn, as Cavell puts it, "presents itself as ignorance—a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack." I saw my own deflection of other's pain and my own pain as well, a psychological deflection into medical terminology as a manifestation of my desire to help, misguided by my fear of being powerless.

Being exposed to Cavell has undoubtedly made me a better person. I'm hoping that will translate into making me a better philosopher, a better friend, and a one day, a better doctor. I try not to shrink away anymore from uncertainty, confine myself or others to labels that determine our growth, or use my intellect to spread loneliness, as I see it so often being done by others. In the great space in between myself and the world, I try now to welcome my humanity, to embrace the uncertainty of existence while not allowing it to condemn my empathy. I suppose all that I need to say is that in every academic field I've explored, be it biology, chemistry, mathematics, or philosophy, all I've learned has seemed to be riddled with an insidious desire to transcend what we perceive as the confines of our humanity. Yet when I read Cavell, I see that when we let go of our need for power—our desire to transcend, to overcome the unknown—then our humanity is beautiful.

### **Louisa Kania, '20**

When I signed up for Bernie's course on Cavell in the spring of 2018, I didn't know that I was signing up for a personal odyssey. As I began to read Cavell, I couldn't qui-

te place what it was in his essays that struck me, but his words shimmered with beauty, voice, and vital energy. Even when I couldn't follow all of the twists and nuances of his thinking, I felt his ideas resonating in my body. I found myself coming alive. On several occasions—particularly while reading “Knowing and Acknowledging” and “The Avoidance of Love”—my nose began to tingle and my eyes started tearing up even before I had mentally processed what Cavell was saying. Sometimes I felt the force of his words so strongly that I had to pause in the middle of my reading and lean back in my chair, pushing the text away from me to give his ideas more space to expand. Nor was Cavell far from my mind as I went about my days that semester; more so than for any other scholar I've read, I found myself thinking about him and bringing him up on an almost daily basis in conversations with friends.

Yet when I began thinking about writing this piece, now almost a year after having first read Cavell, I found myself worrying that I didn't know enough about him, that I couldn't speak to his ideas with any sort of intellectual depth or rigor. When I tried to think back on what I'd learned from him, what I remembered most of all was not a specific concept or idea but, rather, the *feeling* of reading him—the feeling, I realize now, of being acknowledged. And as I reread his essays and my class notes, it occurred to me that although I have stopped consciously invoking or referring to Cavell, his ideas have seeped deeply into my life and my way of being in the world. Much of the thinking and growing that I've done in the past year has emerged in some way from these seeds. In this sense, I have not been thinking about Cavell's ideas so much as I have been embodying and enacting them.

I spent the first two-and-half-years of college and much of my life before that searching for meaning, analyzing everything, and trying to find the “right” way to think and live—the system or set of rules that would fill up or explain away the emptiness and groundlessness that I felt lurking just below the surface of my experiences. I didn't trust my own perspectives and voice, and I looked, instead, to external standards and rules for guidance on how to think and act. This was true in my personal life as well as in my intellectual life. I often refrained from expressing myself in social situations, and I denied a place to my subjectivity in my academic pursuits, dismissing the validity of my personal experiences in the classroom and writing and talking as if I existed as a sort of abstract, disembodied mind.

But encountering Cavell and Wittgenstein (especially Wittgenstein as understood by Cavell) changed all of that for me. I began to recognize that my attachment to rules and my quest for some sort of ultimate meaning was misguided, that I had been searching in language and in reality itself for a fixed ground that wasn't there. As I started opening up to life's contingency, instability, and groundlessness, I found myself letting go of the incessant search for meaning that had driven me for so long. At the same time, as I explored the idea that meaning does not exist outside specific contexts and the forms of everyday life, I realized that I could not and should not dismiss my subjectivity.

Wittgenstein suggests that if we don't express our pain, we cannot learn the language to talk about it, while Cavell writes about the possibility that others can acknowledge pain that we are unable to see in ourselves. In Cavell, I found that kind of acknowledgment and, with it, the language I had been searching for—for experiences I hadn't been able to understand and pain I had been suppressing. Like the skeptic whom Cavell describes with his remarkable empathy and generosity, I realized that all that time I had been seeking a system of knowledge, I had been deflecting a deeper, more existential anxiety—a sense of aloneness. I had been longing for the sort of deep, meaningful relationships that give life color and richness, but the harder I looked, the more those sorts of relationships seemed to elude me.

I found my diagnosis in "The Avoidance of Love." Acknowledging and connecting with other people requires "self-revelation," yet I had been unwilling to be vulnerable, to let myself be seen by others. In trying to push away the separation and aloneness I felt, I had been afraid of difference—both of acknowledging differences and of being different myself. I had imagined—incorrectly, as Cavell showed me—that difference necessarily means severance. At the same time, I recognized myself in Cavell's description of King Lear in "The Avoidance of Love"; even as I was afraid of separation, on another level, I think I was afraid of true connection, of being seen and loved. In reading Cavell's essays, I saw how my fear of being vulnerable and revealing myself to others was not only a loss to me but also something that could hurt others. In failing to acknowledge my own fears and sense of isolation, I had been unable to offer complete acknowledgement to others. In this way, I had been, by Cavell's analysis, treating the people around me almost like fictional characters, denying their full

and complex humanity and limiting the depth of the relationships I could form with them. I had been living precisely the sort of tragic paradox that Cavell writes about: in denying difference and separation out of a desire for connection, I had failed to connect because I had not been present with or for the people around me. Moreover, if, as I believe, we become real through interaction with others, by reducing the people around me to fictional characters, I had also been reducing my own existence to a sort of fiction.

As Cavell writes, acknowledgement “is not a description of a given response” (“Knowing and Acknowledging”). It isn’t something we can describe or define as an abstract category; it’s something that we have to live, something that I am trying to live. I have been trying to live a life of presence and of acknowledgement, acknowledgement of both myself and others. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake, with its pursuit of rules, theories, and fixed meaning, no longer holds the urgency or even appeal that it once did for me. Now what I care about is something much more human and embodied—learning to live fully in day-to-day moments, to respond skillfully to whatever is present, and to be in relationship with myself and with others. I am trying to realize—in the fullest sense of the word—what acknowledgment means and looks like in my life.

These reflections feel very personal, not at all like something fit to go into a scholarly journal. But learning is personal, and reading Cavell is especially personal. Stanley Cavell led me to explore some of my most fundamental fears, anxieties, and unspoken beliefs—a journey that, as I reflect on it now, makes me understand just how appropriate it is to describe Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein as “therapeutic.” Cavell wasn’t just another interesting theorist who gave me a neat, new way of thinking; he helped me see myself and my life more clearly. So, when I think back on what it was like to take a course on Cavell, I realize that I wasn’t learning how to think; I was learning how to live.

When I first read “Knowing and Acknowledging,” I wrote in my journal, “Every response is an acknowledgement in some way; a failure to acknowledge is its own type of acknowledgement. [...] Everywhere I am is somewhere; I’m always situated, affecting, and responding to what is around me. Being intentional and aware is so profoundly important. Every day, every interaction, even every moment offers an op-

portunity for acknowledgement. How then will I live? Can I live a life of acknowledgment?” I see now that these are questions I’ve spent the past year trying to answer with my life, and I know that I’ll continue living with them. And for that, I am, and will remain, deeply grateful to Cavell.

### **Nelly Lin-Schweitzer, '21**

I grew up less than a fifteen-minute walk from Stanley Cavell’s house, knowing nothing of it. Chances are I even saw him once or twice in the street. That never-intersecting physical proximity stands in odd relief against the way that his work has entered my homes, in the lines from Cavell’s “Excursus” that I read to my girlfriend, my mom, and my dad. There are strands of his ideas woven into my papers, my conversations with loved ones, and this tangle of thoughts and remembrances.

I’m dangled between two homes now—the one at college where I first learned about Cavell from Bernie and the one where my parents live. The rhythms of college-to-home involve transitioning from a sort of armored mania (armor cracks, of course, but I don’t cry in front of other people) to a differently-armed disarmament. I relax at home, yes, but I still don’t cry in front of other people. It’s a cultural thing, maybe.

When I write “crying in front of people,” I’m feeling around the concept without really touching it. Performative, but only the silhouette of the performance. Crying is theatrical but also a response to theater, and also a feeling.

To be honest, I do cry in front of people sometimes. I pretend that trying not to is a prerequisite for crying’s authenticity, but I just remembered—some actors tell themselves not to cry in order to cry. Antiperformance becomes performance. Once, while I was shouting at you (I don’t think I cared about prerequisites then). Once, in a packed room of sniffing listeners as a person spoke his poem. A bit like a theater audience, that. Neither was acknowledged. Can a body’s expression (no longer suppressible—at least, made to seem so) double as acknowledgement? Is internally-performative suppression (which is maybe also expression) really necessary for “authentic” expression? Or are the tears pain itself, like tears in my papery explanations of intention and defected performance?

*Like.* I think I use comparisons a lot to try to make people acknowledge what I'm saying with responses of the right magnitude. The most I've ever inadvertently lied was by exaggerating scale because I wanted you to respond with the proper awe that the original size, in my mind, deserved (I knew it would overwhelm you). But what right do I have to the kind of response you give me? I'm still grappling with the ways in which racism, colonialism, globalization, etc. all ought to demand a particular response (or at least acknowledgment), and yet consciously dictating, pulling other people's strings, strays into puppet-master territory.

What do I do when something real I'm trying to say becomes ammo for jokes? The worst bit is I kind of get why you think it's funny. The part of me almost laughing makes me sick (or is this me making myself sick? Because it seems like the appropriate response?). I'm afraid you're not ever going to see what I mean. When I talk to my mom sometimes, it's like a dam has burst open. She really listens. I'm not sure if I could break down what that means, or if I need to.

When I read Cavell, I let myself wonder.