

25. Acknowledgments: Thinking of and Thanking Stanley Cavell

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Thanking well is difficult work. And only someone who has attempted to convey thanks will know of the adversity one finds in trying to find (one's own?) words of thanks. In an academic or we might say more broadly, bibliophilic context, the name we give to that moment of expressed and explicit (which is to say sanctioned) thanks is (the) Acknowledgments. The Cavellian resonances and overlaps of significance for this capitalized, capstone forum will stand out in high relief, even at first glance. But it is to the deep relationships between what an understanding of the Cavellian concept (or conception or even better, re-conception) of acknowledgment might (or must) betoken about the genre we call Acknowledgments that I turn to in what follows.

In *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Reflections on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cavell writes of Introductions: "I confess I never skip them."¹ I can say the same about Cavell's ever-present Acknowledgments: they not only often provide insight into the gestation of his project (who he engaged, where he was working, what he was reading, the places visited, the events he attended, etc.), but also, more unusually, the inclusion of and working out of ideas in this space that is, for many others, merely a perfunctory space for thanks (and sometimes of them). The Acknowledgments as an addendum, and at that perhaps even a chore (because a cause of anxiety: where do I begin?), become in Cavell's hands, yet again, *an occasion for thinking*—even as they are, to be sure, for *thanking*.

In this customary place, a constitutive part of many if not most books, that has come to be called (the) Acknowledgments, I found Cavell's treatment of the custom

1. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), xi.

transformed it. And part of the transformation involved distributing or re-distributing the specific labors of acknowledgment. In Cavell's vast archipelago of dispatches, Acknowledgments go by a variety of names, repurposed to Cavell's needs. For instance, the Preface to *The World Viewed* and the Foreword to *The Claim of Reason* carry many hallmarks of the Acknowledgments genre (e.g., a pedigree of influence and debts, naming individuals, referencing and charting one's intellectual path to the book that lies ahead, etc.). And there are numerous occasions in the course of his philosophical prose, that is, when he is "at work" as a professional philosopher, when acknowledgments are made, parsed, and integrated seamlessly into the fabric of the remark—yet, for his art and tact, they may go unnoticed; by contrast, repeated invocations of "my teacher J. L. Austin," might qualify as a signature instance of an overt mention.²

When I first began reading books by Cavell, it was the Acknowledgments that I first dwelled upon mostly deliberately, with the most curiosity. Looking back, perhaps my fascination, for a young wannabe scholar, this obscure Jude, had something to do with the impression that such writing would be among the more easily intelligible portions of his prose. So, a diversion then, but with good reason. Part of my broader interest lay in the question how such a book as this gets written—what contributes to its making and how the author understands that process. Here was a thinker, it seemed to me, writing with candor about his preoccupations and his influences, and, to be sure, those people and places that occupied his days and nights while creating the book. The preferred and thus default mode of the impersonal and the clinical in (much professional) philosophical prose is traded in, by Cavell, for the personal, even the private, befitting "autobiographical exercises," as he puts it in the subtitle to *A Pitch of Philosophy*—characteristics endogenous to the nature of any given Acknowledgments. In this delimited precinct, a place liberated from the expectations of argument form, I seemed to follow better the line of his thought since it mostly comprised a very glamorous list of persons and texts, sometimes a narrative of time and place, and just as often, seemingly off-the-cuff remembrances that had the quality of character studies and reports of intimacies, such as we find in private journals as well

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

as novels and, in particular, the best of metafiction: when the author stands beside her work, and perhaps “beside [herself] in a sane sense.”³ In this regard, Acknowledgments as a genre have the character of an aside, and so they beckon, with uncanny intimacy, as if something profound will be, or at least might be, revealed. And more than novelistic invention, however compelling, however satisfying, there was *also* an implied promise that an etiology or a natural history of a mind—and its lettered offspring—could be gleaned from a close reading of such behind-the-scenes catalogues of thanks.

For a mind in need of learning how to read such prose as his, the taxonomy of this particular type of paratext—which I first encountered in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, a book, at the time, one could buy in print as a recent publication at the legendary Talking Leaves bookstore in Buffalo, New York—provided, let me say, not just a grounding but more specifically an atmosphere, an air, in which to think, and even more precisely, if peculiarly, to thank. To have thoughts profound enough to require a registry of debts incurred and paths taken seemed (then and still does) an enticing, foreign possibility. By contrast, I wondered and worried about what would it be like to write acknowledgments, at length, for work that was *not* worthy of its gratitude, for example, where one’s thanks would be an admission of one’s vanity and not of one’s generosity toward others; the failure to thank properly, appropriately, with propriety seemed a painful instance of human fallibility and the ironies that stalk us, and as I learned more about Cavell’s work, a particular expression of tragedy.

Of course, as a young philosopher-in-training in Buffalo, under the mentorship of Newton Garver (who studied with Norman Malcolm and Max Black—who welcomed Wittgenstein to Cornell on his only visit to America, and Black who published Cavell’s “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” in *Philosophy in America*⁴ before it appeared in *Must We Mean What We Say?*), and Peter H. Hare (a genuine pluralist who studied with the greats of Columbia pragmatism and was longtime co-editor of *The Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society*), and Kah Kyung Cho (who studied with Heidegger and Gadamer)—I was coming to consciousness that one

3. Henry David Thoreau, “Solitude,” ch. five of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). See also Cavell, *The Senses of Walden, An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco, CA: Northpoint Press, 1981), 104.

4. *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964).

could have so many people to thank for the creation of a book. Still, having people to thank is not the same as the act or art of thanking them. Clearly, even at first blush, Cavell's Acknowledgments were neither issued as a list to be dutifully checked off nor off-handedly submitted as an afterthought; his example proposed something entirely new to me: Acknowledgments as a genre of philosophy. In this encounter, I had not yet realized that, for Cavell, acknowledgment was a mode of disciplined response to an entire strain of Western philosophical thought.

Hare, knowing my youthful dedication to Emerson and what to his judgment (and so many others) was the peculiarity of Emerson as a legitimate subject in and for professional philosophy, said something to me that I could not assess with any depth or perspective at this early stage: as he warily handed over to me his copy of Cavell's *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, he added the proviso that I remember sounding this way: "since you love Emerson and philosophy, this is the writer for you. Love his work all you want, but do not emulate it." At the time, I had no bearing on what the warning might mean (especially to me), but it left me curious, if cautious. Even at this instant, I was more interested in what might be causing the scandal: what was it in Cavell's writing—this book or some other by him—that could lead a professional philosopher to recommend the work while also, somehow, warning against it? The book—and its author—was a gift given then somehow retracted. (Another professional philosopher, a bit later on, and in the same vein of exhortation about his style or method, remarked elliptically, but in a disparaging manner: "Cavell can get away with it. No one else." I wondered what was being or could be "gotten away with," and why one might or should want to get away with it.) In Hare's admonition, I see a classic scene of instruction, of *paideia*, of what we share with the young, what we make available to them and when—and why (as he was saying to me that I was, at last, *ready* to read something by Cavell). Hare's intentions, then, as now, feel genuine and uncynical, and absent any personal grudge or malice toward the author. Hare was, after all, a pragmatist and a pluralist, and so he seemed to be simply reporting on "conditions handsome and unhandsome" as he found them in his profession, the one I was trying to train in. As the years passed, I have interpreted his remark as a sign of a mentor's protectiveness. He seemed to know what the profession was capable of and he wanted to save me some grief.

My first impressions of reading *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* validated Hare's sense that I was suited to its content, even if it was, in all the ways one would expect, beyond me. I had been, after all, reading Wittgenstein and Heidegger and William James alongside Aristotle and Plato and Nietzsche—and Emerson, of course—so I could see in those disparate writers differences in style and topic, but I could not, as it were, judge their legitimacy or threat to any established professional community or cult—much less to those who would write about them professionally. In fact, if anything *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* seemed *perfectly reasonable* in its intellectual gregariousness and eclecticism, for there I found Emerson as the philosophical wellspring (I thought fittingly, at last) with robust tentacles outstretched to Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Plato and Nietzsche, and even Dewey (though not always in a good way).

“No one thinks thanks,” wrote Gertrude Stein toward the end of *A Novel of Thank You*, yet we have found a few who do: Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Cavell.⁵ In the acknowledgments for *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, one can almost immediately discern a care and deliberateness rare for the form. And more than being thankful, he seemed thoughtful—the two modes or moods were joined. As for the genre as we *typically* encounter it, we could say that people are thanked, often it must be said, somewhat thanklessly, that is with a certain forced quality: in such cases, the demand to speak blanches the potency of what gets said. As the “thanks” pile up so quickly, there is much leaning on the thesaurus and conjugation: I wish to thank, I must thank, thanks are owed to, thanks to all who, many thanks for, with tremendous thanks, I express my gratitude to, I feel grateful for, etc. Bromides and platitudes abound as does the superlative case. By contrast, Cavell wrote with measured appreciation, which meant that one could feel the nuances of his gratitude. The gradations were subtle and for that significant. He did not overstate and so his statements felt honest.

If I found in Cavell's work a new way of thinking, what I found in Cavell's Acknowledgments, with their distinctive register of sincerity—and as I began to seek out his books eagerly, reading the Acknowledgments first, *before* the Introduction—was a new way thanking. We could ask: What is called thanking? I realize that the pun in

5. Gertrude Stein, *A Novel of Thank You* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), 235.

English may be tiresome to some, at some point, especially if there is a fatigue with Heidegger who made so much of thinking and thanking (or *thencan* [to think] and *thancian* [to thank])⁶, but for me, there abides such a remainder of fervor and fecundity in the relationship—a truly justified proximity, an undeniable intimacy for these two terms—that I risk sustaining it. I couldn't then, and I still can't, disentangle the one from the other: to think is to thank, and to thank is to think. What a discovery!

The truth of the equivalency can be expressed or illustrated in any number of cases. Take one, as I understand it, shared by Steven Affeldt: that when Cavell was asked “How do you have time to write?” He replied: “I'm writing right now.”⁷ This sentiment, to my mind, means that writing is predicated on a certain amount of socializing—being good company to one's friends and one's spouse, being a descent parent, being a teacher (whatever shape the classroom might take), reading and commenting on the work of others, etc.—and that only after such experiences, or with some amount of them, can one be solitary and take up the task of writing, that is, writing something worthy of one's commitments beyond the page. When we write (alone, as we must), we hear the voices of our teachers and students, our friends and families, the texts we have read and marked-up lovingly in the margins, and we are not alone (as we cannot be). Writing is a social event, after all, no matter the occasional tremor felt in the face of the endlessly receding white page of the digital word-processing file; still, what may be harder is not the void but contending with what one has, in fact, written. Cavell's Acknowledgments are distinctly his (again, the sincerity and thus singularity of his voice is unmistakable) but it is the community that surrounds him, that engages him, that he draws insight and support from—even as he himself is so often, as in the pages of this commemorative volume, noted as a rare source of insight and support—that finds its acknowledgment in his notes of orientation and appreciation.

We may bracket for a moment an ancillary (and still interesting) but also distracting aspect of the genre: the way in which Acknowledgments often serve as a kind of *curriculum vitae* of academic affiliation and patronage along with the registration

6. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking? [Was Heisst Denken?]*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Perennial, 1976).

7. Steven Affeldt, “Celebrating the Life and Work of Stanley Cavell,” convened in Emerson Hall 105, Harvard University, November 10, 2018.

of awards, grants, and the anointing of intellectual and institutional approval by individuals and their various agents and agencies. In today's lexicon, this may strike us as a humblebrag. And such a thought makes one wonder about the *location* of the Acknowledgments: it appears as often in the front matter as the back matter, leaving us to ask what the convention of such placement is meant to signal: that one must pass through it in order to qualify for reading the book, or that having read the book, one is now prepared to understand something of its conditions for creation. With these endpoints in play, dialectical styles seem suddenly pertinent, as if we are speaking of "having" the first word or "getting" the last one. Is this predicament a variation on Emerson's notion that "great geniuses have the shortest biographies"?⁸ And so likewise, in the author biographies or list of contributors to books, the academic stars have the one-liners while those without a recognition that precedes them, spend time articulating their efforts and effects; the author biography, it turns out, is a specimen of self-acknowledgment.

Beyond my overt, perhaps all too obvious remarks on the genre of Acknowledgments (especially for readers who notice patterns, and to be sure, who also have participated in making them), I wish to point up and point out how it is that Cavell's Acknowledgments, despite their extent, managed to do all this thanking with quite a light touch, where, in a paradoxical way, the tone—that is, one that suppresses or displaces a certain *drama* of gratitude—made the thanks seem so much more genuine, temperate, and enduring than they might otherwise be. It really felt, even from that first or second reading, that Cavell meant what he said.

If many writers of fiction and nonfiction alike are familiar with the task (perhaps variously a privilege and a burden) of composing remarks that acknowledge others—and their contributions to a given work—the very nature of how language might be deployed for such labor becomes of immediate and pronounced interest. For one thing, if "thanks" and "thank you" are generic, how do they become, in this brief space of the Acknowledgments, something more, which is to say, less—circumscribed as borrowed words must be for the special purpose of addressing specific people and their specific modes of aid, comfort, and correction? If the genre is so generic,

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Plato; or, the Philosopher," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 635.

how much one must court parody, even satire, in writing Acknowledgments? Almost at once, the apparently straightforward task of thanking becomes troubled by thinking, as if over-thanking itself might be a form of over-thinking. Such problems, invented or encountered, call for counsel. Where better to look, then, than to one of the maestros of Acknowledgments, one for whom the mode appears to be a natural milieu—not so much as if he invented it than as if it were invented for him. As our greatest theorist of acknowledgment, Cavell can seem called to fulfill the potential of the form. One need not be personally thanked in his Acknowledgments to notice that they are a breed apart from the familiar run of such lines—an education in thanks. Yet, if the forum is *pro forma*, how can or should we account for this Cavellian difference? And moreover, what it may teach us about the art and effort of acknowledging others? As Cavell was, and likely will remain, our Acknowledger-in-Chief, we can study from his model how one might achieve truly acknowledging Acknowledgments.

The genre of acknowledgments, such as we find it practiced among the standard paratexts of a given book or creative work, announces itself inadvertently as something of a Cavellian pun—doubtless, a striking double entendre on what we are compelled to name a “master tone” in his *oeuvre*.⁹ And indeed, I do mean to invoke and discuss (and acknowledge!) how this forum for thanks—viz., (the) Acknowledgments—is related to Cavell’s understanding of acknowledgment as such, as he theorized it. Yet, once pointed out, the connection may be almost too painfully obvious and facile to repeat. Though I do not wish to belabor the richness of the pun, I am convinced that there remains much else in *Cavell’s* creation of the Acknowledgment sections of his books that feels worth dwelling on, among many other things, that there appears to be a continuous call upon us—his readers, his audience—to find a way of expressing thanks as a mode of thought. The question we face in composing the Acknowledgments is never far away in Cavell’s exhibition: how was the creation of this work possible? The gesture of answering it, of course, often subsumes a need to state explicitly how we achieved or failed to achieve what we set out to do (perhaps especially when such labor is, in matters of literary and philosophical invention, so rarely guided by a discrete teleology, much less a convincing way of offering proof that objecti-

9. Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 134, 244.

ves have been reached, satisfyingly so or otherwise). My efforts here are, very evident to me, subject to these same laws.

In Cavell's Acknowledgments, we may see the ways in which we write for ourselves, that we are, in fact, our own *or* best *or* only audience (if only when we get beyond doubts concerning our capacity for expressiveness). Can we hazard to consider that thanking is a ruse—for it insinuates others in a project that is, in fact, foreign to them; that the insistence on the tracing of influences, the accounting for debts, etc., is a distraction from or a distortion of what lead one to this point? For as William Goldman is attributed as having said: "The easiest thing to do on earth is not write." Writing Acknowledgments, then, may pass as a form of therapy—a conversation in which an author tells a story about who and what *feels* pertinent. There is something of the séance in the art of such composition. Though these words are public, shared (as noted above), there is some inkling that I can yet claim them for myself, make them mine; again, how could a note of thanks do its work if the words that comprise it are not personal? As Cavell put it, across a span of three decades:

Only in stages have I come to see that each of my ventures in and from philosophy bears on ways of understanding the extent to which my relation to myself is figured in my relation to my words.¹⁰

When, in what follows, I feel pressed by the question of my right to speak for philosophy, I sometimes suggest that I am merely speaking for *myself*, and sometimes I suggest that philosophy is not *mine* at all—its results are true for every man or else they are worthless.¹¹

In such remarks, we can hear Emerson—"what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men," which he describes as genius—and Cavell's concern about the interaction between the public and the private, for example, as when we feel, as Emerson did, that "every word they say chagrins us."¹² In *Cities of Words*, when speaking of

10. Cavell, from the Preface to the updated edition of *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

11. Cavell, from the Foreword, "An Audience for Philosophy," to *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), xxv-xxvi. The Foreword is dated 1968.

12. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays and Lectures*, 259, 264.

Emerson's experience of the "inattentiveness and meanness" that defines the use of the very same words he has at his disposal, we are told that his "language is hence in continuous struggle with itself, as if he is having to translate, in his American idiom, English into English."¹³ Let us submit that one of the special attributes of highly conscribed genres, such as acknowledgments—like love letters and condolences—agitates that "struggle with itself" that language is perpetually undergoing through us. Like all constraints, the rigidity of this particular art of letters exacerbates our desire to say something that is one's own (to thank another with satisfaction for us both), while keeping a vigil for the cliché, saccharine, vapid, and vain.

We are, by now, familiar with the genre as it is routinely practiced. The thanks tend to be ranked and arranged in some habitual fashion, learned by imitation and osmosis—"when I began this project" inaugurates the mood of reflection, of stock-taking. And then the paragraphs organize the kinds of people or entities being thanked: colleagues, grant-giving bodies, colleges and universities that funded the operation or made leave-time available; editors, staff at the press, rights holders lending permission to reprint, etc. Specific people are noted for their reading of earlier, less refined drafts of the work. Professional debts are registered, and slowly, more personal ones emerge, until the crescendo when the writer's intimates find their moment in print. Here, variously those who were supportive and (often) neglected during composition—family, friends, spouses and partners, perhaps children and pets—are mentioned for their aid and love and sacrifices, for every book represents some untold number of hours that the writer spent *away* from all these loved ones. Though solitary writing demands social hours, sometimes the society must only live within—either because one's audience has perished or because it has become estranged, both often beyond the control and thus the fault of the author. (In the last line of his Acknowledgments for *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, David Rudrum's heartbreaking dedication to his son stands out in this regard: "Cedric, I only wish I could have spent the time it took to write this book with you instead."¹⁴)

13. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 8.

14. Cavell's own acknowledgment of his son, Benjamin, as well as his wife, Cathleen Cohen Cavell, at the end of the Foreword to *The Claim of Reason* (where he had already invoked his daughter, Rachel), presents the flip side of Rudrum's unenviable position, for they "took time I thought I did not have and converted it into energy I thought I had foregone," xxvi.

Somewhere in the mix, there is often a statement of the shortcomings of the work: one can think, surely, of the famous lament Wittgenstein makes at the outset of *Philosophical Investigations*, in his Preface: “After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. [...],” but we see it in Cavell too: “That I am alone liable for the opacities and the cruelties which defeat what I wanted to say, is a miserably simple fact. What is problematic is the expectation borne by those who have tried to correct them, and to comfort the pain of correcting them.”¹⁵ These admissions of failure, or worry of its reality, may also be seen as prophylactics *against* failure, for if one signals a work’s shortcomings before the critics arrive (Wittgenstein’s admission appears in the *second paragraph* of his now-landmark text), there may be a measure of defense in place prior to anticipated attacks. Authors hope, of course, that such labors amount to something (especially if it means one’s child was neglected in the process, or one’s hard-won produce amounted to much less than one dreamed of, and so one’s sacrifices—and the sacrifices of others—were for naught, or nearly so), but if errors, lacunae, or missteps remain, they are in the familiar phrasing, “the author’s own.” Such moments of melancholy and sober responsibility can seem very much like an apology—and *not* in the classical sense of a defense, but as a genuine admission or confession of lapse, of coming up short, of making a valiant if flawed effort. In these respects, and others, no matter the enthusiasm of the Acknowledgments, it is a tragic genre.

Part of the tragedy, perhaps largely *unacknowledged* in most Acknowledgments, is the genuine sense of disaffection one feels with the work one is presenting as one’s own; such a mood or gesture would certainly strike out against the motives of the publisher, who should not want shortcomings heralded in the opening lines of the book, nor at the end of it. What one seems to be acknowledging, as one goes about thanking, is that one has fallen short of one’s aspiration for the work, and yet that people who helped make some minimal progress should (still) be thanked for that modest advance. Partly, we can recognize in this spirit of defeat how we are troubled by our use of words, the very matter of the work at hand. As Cavell notes in *Cities of Words*, “[h]ere I recall Emerson’s repeated idea that serious writers write beyond

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), vii; Cavell, Acknowledgments to *Must We Mean What We Say?* (December 1968), 14.

themselves, or as he puts the matter, that character (meaning our constitution and our writing) teaches above our will.”¹⁶ If one spends the better part of a book “writing beyond” oneself, the least one can do is acknowledge it, for worse and, apparently on this line of thinking, for better. For, as Cavell concludes: “to understand serious writing,” which we may say is (always) our mandate in reading Cavell’s work, “will precisely require us to question what a text asserts in order to arrive at the conviction that we are covering the ground gained in what its words actually contrive to say.”¹⁷ Our words fail us but then “there are no *other* words to say than the words everyone is saying.”¹⁸ One wants to affirm: I did the best I could with the words I had at my disposal. But then that is what everyone can claim, so what is my excuse?

The underlying tragic timbre is also recognized in the thanking of dead people—namely, that acknowledgment is never too late, though it may be belated. Influential teachers, friends, colleagues, and lost intimates (parents, spouses, children, students)—and non-intimates (one’s heroes)—can all be summoned whether or not they are alive, and so the genre also accommodates quite handily the fugitive expressions familiar to the memorial. Is it too much to say, to claim, that we are what we remember? And if memory is, in part, a choice, something we can cultivate, then what we choose to remember—to commemorate—also speaks to our individual and collective values, priorities, and aspirations. As we are gathered to “remember together”—in this commemorative issue—we see how naturally suited Acknowledgments are to affording access to the expanse of one’s memory: if I can remember it, it can be invoked, and if invoked, then thanked. Whether a person is “around” to read it matters not. (Dedications can go further still, by naming the famous and entirely well-known person that knows, as it were, nothing of one’s work—but whose fame marks out some measure of significance; or, of naming the nonfamous person that very few know—thus assuring that the significance remains insular, largely unavailable. Epigraphs are affiliates to such appropriation-as-acknowledgment—Emerson sits at the lead of Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* and a century earlier, in the year of Emerson’s death, in the front matter of Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* [*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882].) And yet, since it is not clear why such a public memorial should be

16. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 8-9.

17. *Ibid.*, 9.

18. *Ibid.*, 8.

made at all (why *are* Acknowledgments written?), one returns to the genre—especially in its most canny, personal moments—as sharing a mood with the epistolary and the diaristic, as a variant of the autobiographical.

For the many people who did write for the occasion of this commemorative issue of *Conversations*—and to whom we all must be grateful—I am also intrigued by the way some people, so near to Cavell intellectually (and in some cases personally), that is, so indebted to him, his work, declined or withdrew from contributing, citing not a lack of time but a sense of not being ready to speak or write of their indebtedness. This notion of “processing” grief, perhaps especially as a person is caught up with the demands of one’s ongoing intellectual and everyday life, is trying. For example, when a parent dies, say, a child speaks most often from *emotional* loss, whereas when a person experiences the death of an *intellectual* mentor (whom one may or may not love like a parent, but often like a mentor, or elder guide or guru), taking up the pen in this double register can be quite difficult. I heard about how some who tried to write were unhappy with what they wrote—the work seeming forced, insincere even. Another description I heard appealed to the image of being “too close” to the memory of his death. Proximity and intensity both would seem to confound our efforts to thank, not liberate and lubricate them. Though we may feel full of thanks, in the face of translating that emotion through intellectual labors, we may grow or go silent—find ourselves speechless. First to lose, then to be at a loss; a tragedy duplicated. Such an affliction must be widespread, for we know the feeling of not being able to thank sufficiently the people we love the most, or respect the most, or by whom we count ourselves influenced the most. What a difficult discovery, the experience that a gift is, or creates, a kind of debt, and acknowledging that gift-as-debt can be the cause of a range of responses: anxiety, resentment, guilt, fear, frustration, desperation, silence, sadness, loquaciousness, procrastination, belaboring, getting it wrong, and forgetfulness.

Even as we thank, we can be haunted by the persistent, underlying sense that we may simply *forget* who to thank, as if (the most) important influences are integrated so well that they can no longer be identified or attributable as “outside” forces. “He ground them all into paint,” wrote Emerson, “As a good chimney burns its smoke, so a philosopher converts the value of all his fortunes into his intellectual perfor-

mances,” hence, at last, there is “no external biography” to be found.¹⁹ With quotation marks in effect, a Freudian might say that such “forgetfulness” is a measure of the importance itself—and as a result that the most central and essential positive influences will, *must be*, left aside, go under- or even unacknowledged. But why? Narcissism, sure. Or mainly a measure of anxiety, where the fear of forgetting is enough to motivate its realization. And we have already spoken about the troubles with remembering—that one thanks insufficiently or inelegantly or (again tracking self-regard) with too much deference to one’s good fortune in having such people to thank in the first place.

If there is something of an admitted challenge in writing about Cavell’s works—his words—perhaps there is now, also, something of the struggle to write about him as a person. Some have managed to compose a statement, some have asked for more time but come up short; both seem worthy responses to a profound occasion for thinking. In both scenarios, though, we are given a chance to think anew about what it means to *have words* for our experiences and what it means to *lose* them. I cannot help but feel both are necessary: to make a bid for articulation (as a mode of self-understanding and/or in an effort to help a community in its understanding of itself) and also to be mindful of the need to remain quiet—perhaps to withhold or even *deny* words; or, to admit that on some occasions words do not present themselves; one remains speechless, beyond words, because one must. Sadly, all of these predicaments can be the cause of frustration and shame: those who speak, who write, may feel embarrassed by the offering (because it must, necessarily, fall short of the worthy qualities of its object of address), and those who remain silent (because for all their capacity to write—and in these cases, we are invoking significant writers on their own terms—they have not been able to get their emotional and intellectual bearing on a difficult matter). At this cleave point, the harder, harsher interaction between Acknowledgments and acknowledgment—both in a Cavellian mood—make themselves known. The stakes of moral perfectionism, and its aspiration for self-knowledge and human community, are undeniably evident, and imposingly so.

At the very end of Cavell’s Acknowledgments for *The World Viewed*, we receive a report on the audiences *any* book can expect to have: “A book is written for two

19. Emerson, “Plato; or, the Philosopher,” in *Essays and Lectures*, 635.

audiences: the one it may create, whose conversation it invites; and the one that has created it, whose conversation it invokes. Members of the latter may have been dead before the writer was born; if alive, they may be strangers, enemies, or friends he no longer has the right to name.”²⁰ Cavell takes this concluding distinction as a moment to thank Rogers Albritton, “asking him to stand for the rest,” which is to say, asking him to stand as a representative for those who *are* Cavell’s audience, and for whom he can record his genuine thanks—for dead people cannot care that they are thanked, and living people who are estranged or embittered or otherwise at odds will not be moved.

But then how quickly Acknowledgments become, despite all, memorial in nature, for who among us has a living memory of Cavell’s beloved friend, Rogers Albritton? A few, perhaps, but not enough for us to understand why and how he should be representative for an audience worthy of such thanks. In short, why he deserves Cavell’s praise remains a perpetual mystery, perhaps forever deferred, or only momentarily informed (as, for example, in *Little Did I Know* and other “excerpts from memory”). So, if one’s audience is truly so small, must be, then what are Acknowledgments for? Do we write them for ourselves, for those being thanked, for the anonymous reader who likely will never know the author nor those whom she thanks? In this run of questions, we are pressed to the disconcerting conclusion that the Acknowledgments are the most temporary and fleeting moment in any book—that they cannot stand up over time because time dissolves both the audience(s) and the author. Far from being the first thing to read (as if for “lustres” and indications of the origins and processing of insight), they should be neglected, even ignored altogether.²¹ How quickly we get turned around.

Cavell often takes his time when composing Acknowledgments, which leads us to wonder if the length he devotes should be understood as a form of compensation for the book’s content. In the Foreword to *Must We Mean What We Say?*, given the name “An Audience for Philosophy,” Cavell’s first line reads, as if responding to a disgruntled, incredulous referee for the press: “If the essays which follow do not compo-

20. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971/1979), xv.

21. Emerson, “Nominalist and Realist,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. III, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 137.

se a book, collecting resonance from one another, nothing I can say in introducing them will alter that fact.”²² An echo of Wittgenstein’s lament from his Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, invoked above, can be heard, but also a spirit of the conditional that extends into the very pages of Cavell’s work “after” the acknowledgments, for instance, most famously in the opening, paragraph-long question of *The Claim of Reason*, also in reference to Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*: “If not at the beginning [...] then where and how are we to approach this text?”²³ A familiar conditional frame of mind remains decades later, in the bicentennial year of Emerson’s birth, when Cavell writes in his Introduction to *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*: “It is not for me to say whether the present book, collecting all the writing I have published that is mainly and explicitly devoted to Emerson, satisfies any reasonable image others may have of a book about Emerson.”²⁴ I, for one, am much caught up in the notion of a “reasonable image others may have of a book about Emerson,” as if such a thing could be articulated, or for that matter recognized, much less achieved. And yet, though Cavell says it is not for him to say what such an “image,” reasonable or not, might be, he does have something to say, in his own words: “What I wish to say is that if I were to write a book about Emerson,” this is “that book, the only one, or kind, it is given to me to write about Emerson’s work.”²⁵ The achievement of the book, on this occasion, is contained, somehow, in the very limitedness—or we may say, uniqueness—of Cavell’s approach to Emerson. The lines that follow begin “I cannot justify [...],” “I would feel justified [...],” and “The virtue I claim for my procedure [...],” such that the reality of his creation is already being thought of in terms of its audience. And this is something Cavell (innately?) feels called to express.

Let me pick up on the notion that Cavell possessed some kind of special power to adduce Acknowledgments, whether innately or not. For even if the style of his Acknowledgments is self-consciously cultivated (as it is in the lines found in the balance of the book demanding these thanks), and one suspects that in this case an instinct and a practice are not far apart, there is a question that writing Acknowledgments—even if they appear under the guise of a Preface, Foreword, Introduction, or

22. Cavell, first page of Foreword, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xvii.

23. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3.

24. Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, 4.

25. *Ibid.*

Afterword—always implies an admission of disappointment in one’s offering. Indeed, Cavell’s Introduction to *Cities of Words* veritably frames the long history of philosophy as a perpetual meditation on the bifurcation that obtains between human desire and disappointment.²⁶ Acknowledgments, then, are part of a project of compensation for coming up short—as if merely saying what one feels or thinks about the accomplishments of a given work (limited though they may be) might be enough to welcome a reader into the heart of the problem—in effect, to create an audience to share (in one’s own) disappointment. Still, a portion of the work of such an act of compensation, could *also* be to show others what it is like to acknowledge (e.g., lapses, debts, etc.) and perhaps as importantly, *to be* acknowledged—that is to say, praised.

The issue of modeling this behavior (for one’s audience) raises two further points. First, that writing lengthy acknowledgments ends up belaboring one’s point. A reader can ask: is all this qualification and elaboration necessary? Is Cavell compelled to write with such magnitude not only to thank *but also* to protect or preserve the precincts of what he has written; has philosophy, “the profession,” somehow demanded this kind of explanation from him? As Cavell has written, “[p]hilosophy inspires much unhappy love,” and that may be all we need to know: contributing to professional, academic philosophy can, at times, feel like one writes chum for the circling sharks (a striking metaphor offered to me by an elder philosopher that made an impression on me, for obvious reasons; another image, from a different mentor, being that philosophers are like lepers—put to me with the question, “so *why* would you want to join the colony?”).²⁷ Chum meet chump.

Moreover, in belaboring thanks, it remains an open question whether a person is capable of holding the note of thanks with sincerity; things begin cheerfully enough, but by the end, a reader (and the writer before her?) becomes fatigued with the duration and multiplicity of benedictions. The second point, then, is that as one belabors—especially in matters of thanks—one perhaps also, inadvertently, dilutes. In this respect, a simple dedication in the front matter may be the highest form of praise and thanks, while a protracted Acknowledgments may find the completist (eager to inscribe indebtedness to *all* involved) thanking his spouse and the intern who made

26. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 2-4.

27. Cavell, Foreword, in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xxii.

photocopies. Not that they are placed in equal measure, much less in the same line, but that they share a space at all can seem striking. Can we not assume that copies were made by someone? And yet, and yet, the “organizing and participating in the preparation of pages of mine for publication” is at the heart of making a book, so why not?²⁸ Belaboring and dilution, then, can be taken as further risks of writing Acknowledgments, and perhaps more generally. Who is to say when enough is said? Likely not the author, though readers are regularly ready with a reply.

Funny enough (and at this point some humor may be called for), it may be noted that often a writer will spend appreciable time on the opening and concluding paragraphs of a book only to dash off the Acknowledgments, which then, seemingly without noticing, but as a matter of form, *become* the opening or closing paragraphs of the book. That is, the fashions of formatting have it that we commence or conclude our operations with these notes of thanks—as most feature films still retain the habit of opening and closing “credits” (the form’s chosen synonym for acknowledgments), with room made for dedications at either end. Why do I find this humorous? Because in both cases, these very prominent paratexts seldom feel like they are part of the film, either by filmmakers or by those who write about the finished works of art. Critics, for example, seldom remark at length, if at all, on what the titles or scroll say, or mean; these moments of art and information, as it were, speak for themselves. Likewise, for books: how many reviews, or even philosophical meditations, have included extended reflections on the content of Acknowledgments? To be sure, how many Acknowledgments demand our attention as texts worthy of such study? At least in the case of Cavell’s Acknowledgments, the making of them, and the giving of them, is predicated precisely on the conviction that what is written cannot be taken for granted—that is, only Cavell is in a position to say it. And since he means what he says, perhaps especially that he *must* in this coveted domain of sincere expression, their importance should be as central as anything else “in the book.”

Taking the Acknowledgments seriously, though, may not be enough. “The familiar recognition that famous philosophers have failed to understand their predecessors, or say to do them justice [...],” Cavell writes, may be a goad to us at this time

28. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, xxvi.

when interpreting Cavell seems somehow more precious and fragile than ever.²⁹ If we readers of his work and writers about it, had the pleasure and privilege of his commentary on our remarks (as some have had), we can be sure no such comments or correctives will be forthcoming now. We are on our own. I suppose we always were. What would it mean to do Cavell justice? As he continues: such a project “should perhaps be seen less as a matter of a need to transcend past achievements than as an effort to discover philosophy for oneself, as if philosophy exists only in its discovery.”³⁰ Thus, we are not aiming “to do better” than him (whatever that would mean) so much as to do better by ourselves by appreciating “surprise at the fact that there should be such an enterprise that measures the value of our lives.”³¹ Such are the moments when consciousness—merely being aware that one is a thing that *has* awareness—is coupled with conscience and judgment. We marvel at the world in the same moment that we deem it worthy of our care; such a pairing has the character of doing justice.

One last, duly salient, example. At the end of the Acknowledgments placed at the beginning of his first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Cavell states: “First books tend to over-ambitiousness, and nowhere more in the bulk of debts they imagine themselves able to answer for.”³² What I have said thus far about what we imagine or intend the authorship of Acknowledgments to mean has been in conversation with such a claim, admittedly pushing well beyond the bounds of first books. In the present context, though, I wish to conclude by way of asking what we, in these pages and elsewhere, imagine to be *our* ambition (now and seemingly without end) in acknowledging Stanley Cavell? As we estimate the bulk of *our* debts to Cavell, do we misjudge what we are answerable for? James Conant once spoke in striking terms of the “blessing and the curse of the father,” that is, while Cavell was not just the subject of remarks on Conant’s *Doktorvater*, but also a living audience for his remarks.³³ The blessings may be obvious to oneself, depending on who one is, but the curse is harder

29. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 7.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Cavell, Acknowledgments, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xiii.

33. James Conant delivered remarks at a gathering commemorating the publication of Cavell’s *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* at Harvard University in October 2010. The pairing of “the blessing and the curse” also appears in Conant’s “The Concept of America,” *Society*, November/December 2003, 25-26.

to trace and testify to. What, in fact, are we answerable to or for in answering to the call of Cavell's now completed corpus? Perhaps these are the sorts of questions we must ask and then spend a lifetime responding to—sometimes with many words (in the spectrum from well-wrought to unwieldy and worse), few words, or none. One reply may be that in so far as one feels answerable, compelled (compulsively?) to thank and to acknowledge, which in this case means to think continually about, Cavell, one may have stumbled upon a private reply. The debts can feel real and yet resist articulation; the articulation may come and yet fall short. There is no end to failing, or risk of failure, in the business of acknowledging others. But then this was a lesson Cavell showed us in his work, and such illumination is a gift, like so many others he bestowed, that we can be grateful for without qualification or exception. We can state simply, without belaboring our point any further, without diluting our sense of the words we were called here to articulate. Thank you.