

5. Stanley Cavell, Philosopher Untamed

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The great Stanley Cavell died late last month at the age of 91. Below, Harvard University Press Executive Editor for the Humanities, Lindsay Waters, recalls what made Cavell so special.¹

Why not use the word “star,” Stanley asked in his breakthrough book on movies, *The World Viewed*, why not “the more beautiful and more accurate word,” rather than actor or actress? In philosophy he was a Hepburn, a Brando, a Dean, a Bacall, stars into whose souls he gave us entryways. I always thought of him and Hilary Putnam as the “glimmer twins.” Time was on their side, for so many decades, thank the lord. And on ours, too!

We know he was here, and, alas, we know he’s gone now.

Stanley attended monthly meetings of the Harvard University Press Board of Syndics. He dressed beautifully to attend our meetings, and he did his homework for them carefully, and spoke articulately on behalf of the books we had asked him to report on.

And he would join the Press staff for ordinary/extraordinary events like the showing over bag lunches of Rohmer’s *A Tale of Winter*, a movie he’d pried open and made bloom in a chapter of his book *Cities of Words*, which we’d just published. A simple pleasure he shared with us on a summer day in the third floor conference room at 79 Garden Street.

He walked our earth, and we published many of his words once they’d started to flow from his pen, his typewriter, his word processor, when he’d overcome the long blockage wrought by his father’s wraith and wrath.

In the Camelot years, as I am wont to think of them, Stanley was a knight of the realm under the directorship of Arthur Rosenthal, serving at the Press Round Ta-

1. This header and the remarks following it first appeared on the Harvard University Press website blog on July 16, 2018, less than a month after Cavell’s death.—Ed.

ble for meetings with other nobles such as Helen Vendler, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, and Samuel Huntington.

That he was a wonder was proven, paradoxically, by the vehemence of those who strove to deny he existed, from his father to a host of pygmies in cinema studies—a field he can fairly be said to have invented—and philosophy, two “professions” he offended deeply. And though a knight of Arthur’s table he was never cavalier: he shined his shoes and wore a tie to our Syndics’ meetings, but always chafed at the notion of belonging to a profession. Philosophy, truly, has always been untamed; as a human activity it predates all universities and all professions.

Was he perfect? No! What Auden said of Yeats we could say of him: “You were silly like us: your gift survived it all.”

But he was civilized, and a friend. He sat down with us at the Press just as he sat down with our Syndics and with movie-lovers at the Brattle and the Harvard Film Archive to be silent and watch a movie and converse afterwards. He was always willing to join us and others, and to debate the way philosophers are always eager to do, on films like *Groundhog Day* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, and on topics from the ordinary to the miraculous to the most painful, such as the violence parents mete out unfairly to their children.

He deepened and enriched what can seem like the merely technical philosophical topic of skepticism, turning it into an ethical one, the question of how one person can know the mind of another. Watch Stanley conjuring the internal life of an acquiring editor for Harvard University Press: “When I try to imagine what it must be like to be in your position, with more projects in play than ordinary human beings can contemplate, and every one with a talented human being at the other end of your decision hanging on for dear life, I am amazed at your ability to show civilized good humor when you emerge into the world of choices and bottom lines.” He had a project by a young colleague to tell me about: “I hate like hell adding to the hounds at your heels, but here we all are, each with our cry of hounds.” Many authors have been kind, but few have gotten inside my shoes the way he did. This was him cutting right through the problem of Other Minds.

Stanley was a political thinker devoted to promoting equality between men and women and the races. Like John Rawls, he supported many women in their

studies, encouraging them to speak and write, to earn PhDs; many of them we have had the honor of publishing at HUP—Sianne Ngai, Yi-Ping Ong, Nancy Bauer. He gets deeply into the souls of male and female characters. I think of him as being like the heroine of the recent movie *Ladybird*, superficially first of all, because he was from Sacramento, but there is more: he renamed himself, like her, and he faced differences with his parents head-on. He did not try to eradicate skepticism. I saw as we talked that, just as I wanted to gloss over all the differences, he'd want to face them, as happened to us one day in a dispute about Pauline Kael's *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*-style of critical writing. I wanted to tiptoe around the abyss, but he wanted to stare into it and talk about it.

One day not long ago, I had a chance to harvest the fruit of his way. I think of this teaching of his under the rubric "The Philosopher as Producer," borrowing from Benjamin's idea of "The Author as Producer," where he claims you can judge artworks by looking at the artworks they produce by others. I think you can judge if a philosopher is productive if he or she causes others to talk—and not just talk, but change their lives. When I read the line Stanley wrote in *Little Did I Know* about how he could date the moment he realized his father hated him, as in wanted him dead, I immediately called my only brother (I have seven sisters) and told him the line, and Kevin responded, "I can date the moment I knew dad hated me. It was on the other side of the barn, and . . ." Thus began the most fruitful interchange we'd ever had, and it has continued to this day. We'd spent most of our lives not talking together at all. This is productive philosophy.

It wasn't just a "nice," professional relationship Stanley and I had. If you think Harvard means prestige and hierarchy, I ask you to consider the life and teachings of Stanley Cavell. As a younger man I hadn't quite realized that being someone's editor was a job you did til death did you part, but I am so happy in a sad way to report that Stanley is buried up on what should be called Philosophy Hill in Mount Auburn Cemetery, where he lies close to John Rawls, Bob Nozick, and other great thinkers. He was a star.