

15. In Memoriam: Stanley Cavell

ABRAHAM D. STONE

I remember distinctly the moment I learned that David Lewis had died. It was during my years as a postdoctoral fellow, when I was more than a little isolated, and so it turned out to have been some time—months, maybe—since the event.¹ I recall thinking: the world in which I thought I was living, during those months, turned out not to be the actual world, and so I turned out not to be the person I thought I was, but merely a counterpart of that person. And thus arose the half-formed thought (still only half-formed now, alas) that therein lay some insight into what is actually at stake in the conflict between counterpart theory and transworld identity.

There are very many different ways in which philosophical writing can be difficult. In Lewis's case (as in Hume's), the obscurity derives most of all from irony: philosophical theses are argued for, urgently, fluently, and with elaborate and ambitious systematicity, but there are only scattered and sometimes conflicting hints about whence the urgency derives. In Stanley Cavell's case (as in Emerson's, or Thoreau's, or Wittgenstein's) the difficulty lies largely in a different direction. There are a series of statements or short passages, each clear enough in itself, and some, at least, dealing with matters of obvious importance; but the rule of the series, the reason one follows another in just this order, is thoroughly opaque.² Hence Cavell's

1. To be specific, this happened early in my four-year stint as a Harper-Schmidt Fellow at the University of Chicago (2001-2005). Before that, I was a Lady Davis Fellow at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for one year (2000-2001). The present remarks first appeared on the blog "Digressions and Impressions," curated by Eric Schliesser, on July 30, 2018.

2. In contrast to Lewis's judicial minimalism, Cavell strives constantly to raise the stakes, to avoid any philosophical decision on narrow grounds, to clear a broader ground. In *The Claim of Reason*, he mentions God so often that worried students have asked me if it is a "religious" work. I point out that he usually mentions Nietzsche and Marx in the same breath. As to whether or in what sense Cavell was religious, I would hate to say. I know he saw some great significance, which, however, I never understood at all, in the fact that his father had never visited Israel, whereas he had (to participate in a workshop with Reb Derrida himself!).

death leaves me with different thoughts: about the continuation and breaking of series, about whether we can carry on, and whether we should.

Moreover, although I met Lewis only once, I was Cavell's student for many years (as a doctoral student in philosophy, 1993-2000), and in fact he is the one person I regularly refer to (in talking to *my* students, for example) as "my teacher." But I was not one of his closest students. Our relationship was always difficult, no doubt in large part because of my deafness to so much of what he heard. And what he heard that I did not was not limited to such minor items as poetry, jazz, opera, and what to me are just some mildly amusing and/or disquieting old movies. It often extended rather farther, to the words coming out of my own mouth: I might realize too late, after leaving the room, that he had been responding to what I, without knowing it, had literally said. And yet this was a good way to be his student, because, beyond the many listable insights, methods, approaches, even simple facts that I learned from him, the biggest lesson of all, and the one most central to his thought, was about the philosophically essential and impossible nature of that relationship between teacher and student. The teacher, so to speak, at some point, breaks off and says: now continue as I would; and what happens next, if it is not just complete failure, may well involve violence or the threat of violence, or flattery and slavish imitation, or treachery and betrayal, or (as in *King Lear*) all of those combined.³

Cavell's death comes at a time when, though some think that Western philosophy has entered a golden age, others of us fear that it may have ended, that there is and will be no next member of the series after Cavell, after Lewis, after Derrida. But then, on the other hand: it also comes at a time when, having tried (but: *fairly* tried?) doing good, we find, strange as it may seem, that it does not agree with our Constitution. It comes, in other words, at a time when we may ask: why attempt to follow such teachers? Why not reject them and begin anew? The option of rejection—I mean, the option of rejecting our teachers, rejecting the whole tradition of philosophy from which we have emerged, rejecting America, rejecting Europe, rejecting Athens—seems eminently reasonable, more the voice of conscience than of inclination. This is

3. Cavell's hunger for recognition, for acknowledgement, could be as strong as Lear's (it was from self-knowledge that he wrote about that), and there could be an air of flattery and imitation in his presence, which he did not discourage. Some found this repellent. Sometimes I was one of them. But I can assure all such, at least, that any flattery they witnessed was sincere (as, indeed, imitation is always said to be). He was truly loved.

hardly the first such time, of course, but it would be a poor exercise in induction to conclude that it won't or shouldn't be the last: that what Justinian or Descartes or Carnap tried and failed can't and shouldn't now finally be accomplished.

Cavell's response to this, as I understand it, is that the apparent option of rejection is really an option of *repression*. I can't say how essential it is that this be taken as a reception of Freud: Freud's thought is yet another of the things important to Cavell which I feel unable to appreciate, or to which, perhaps, I am resistant. But it explains why Cavell, though he never followed Heidegger into, as he would put it, "the myth of having read everything," also never followed Wittgenstein and Emerson into "the myth of having read nothing." He worried constantly over the canonical figures of Western philosophy—not in a scholarly, originalist way, but beginning with them as he had received them, *stare decisis* (which meant, in some respects: beginning with a mere caricature of them). It explains, too, why lack of recognition, for himself or for his teachers, could so anger him: the story in which "American philosophy" means principally James and Dewey offended him, not as ignorant and inaccurate, but as a *deliberate* (though unconscious) suppression of Emerson and Thoreau. It explains his anger on one occasion when, responding to his description of the logical positivists as "self-stultifying," I said that what he took as self-stultification is actually self-control. "How can you make that distinction after Freud?" was his reply. For me, the time now was (and is) after Avicenna, after Descartes, after Kant, certainly, after Nietzsche, maybe even after Wittgenstein, but *not* after Freud (or after Marx). That was an excuse (elaborative) that he would not accept. But then why isn't this time also after Carnap (or after Neurath, or after Popper)? Cavell knew he could not, so to speak, point to a set of invisible, strong-as-logic (or even: strong-as-sociology) rails that would send me through one set of stops but not through the other. That he might say, in such a case, "Here my spade is turned," was to him not a reassurance but a tragedy.

What time is now? What world is actual? The questions are almost the same, maybe, after all. Indexicals show most starkly the irruption of the pragmatic (and the transcendental?) into semantics. If what is salient to me is not, or not often enough, what is salient to you, we can't speak to one another, even if we speak "the same language." If a lion could speak, how could we understand it? A lion or other non-human

animal—but how do we know which animals are humans? What about drills and children and idiots and Aristotelian or Derridean philosophers? If Locke associates the name “human,” in the phrase “human(e) understanding,” with a complex idea that includes whiteness and maleness (not to mention mechanism, traces of alchemy, Euclidean spatiality,...), and if we understand him, must we not make the same association? Locke, if I *do* understand him, would say that we must. “I know not, how Men [!], who have the same *Idea*, under different Names, or different *Ideas* under the same Name, can, in that case, talk with one another.”) What if our salient points of reference—the chessboard, the well-known beacons and headlands, the *orbis magnus*—turn out to be non-actual, or no longer actual, already dead? What if the rock on which we hoped to found a wall or a state (or a church), which we had hoped to reach at last by clearing up the ground, removing some of the rubbish (even if that should require a sort of moral bog hoe), turns out to be a myth? If the concepts *origin* and *series* (or: permanence, progression, and reversion) are mythical, how can we continue any series? How can we fail to?

What I learned from Cavell—what we have all learned from him, if, as I think, the time now is after Cavell—is not solutions, but problems. We may not be able to continue. We may have no choice but to continue.