

In Memoriam: Stanley Cavell, 1926-2018

Tim Gould

Metropolitan State University of Denver

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than a musical theme can be replaced by any other.)

In the one case, the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)

Words can be hard to say.

—Wittgenstein

Characterizing Stanley Cavell's legacy is probably hopeless but not necessarily thankless. His influence reaches out from philosophy to literary criticism and history, film studies, political science and psychoanalysis. He was president of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association and his work was recognized by the Shakespeare Association and the Psychoanalytic Society of New York.

Cavell was born in Atlanta and died in Brookline, Massachusetts at the age of 91. On his own account, he grew up in two provincial capitals, Sacramento along with Atlanta. This was, among other things, his way of saying he was not a New York intellectual, though he shared with them some important influences and preoccupations. He leaves a tightknit and talented family, four or five academic generations of (non-exclusively) students, readers and friends, and more than fifteen books, ranging in topics from Wittgenstein and Austin to the movies and Shakespeare, to Emerson, Thoreau, Freud, and Nietzsche as well as to museum collections, mass society, opera, jazz, and quilts.

Since Cavell's work seems increasingly less known among academic aestheticians, it might be useful to sketch in some of his basic themes and arguments, as well as something of his place in recent American thought. In aesthetics, he was of a generation with Arthur Danto and Richard Wollheim, both of whom he had known from fairly early on. Like them, he wrote about the arts and literature as near the center of philosophy and not as ornamental. This perspective is not out of order within Continental philosophy, but it remains somewhat alien to mainstream American philosophy. In a wider historical context, which included the majority of his colleagues at Harvard, Cavell was part of the counter-revolution against the still persistent scientific conception of knowledge promulgated by positivism, including the shadows that positivism still casts on ethics and aesthetics.

An early stage of this project is Cavell's critique of the widespread idea that ethics and aesthetics have no "cognitive meaning" or that poetry is a series of pseudo-statements. His response was not to provide such terms with some new logic or some special variety of aesthetic, ethical, or poetic meaning. Rather, he looked at the forms of utterance and discourse in which certain terms occur. He looked less at our physical positions in the world and more at our "standing" in the world. He wanted us to focus on our being in a position to understand a situation and in a position that allows us to make an appropriate claim on others, even if the claim is denied. For instance, "You ought to keep that piano tuned." This imperative 'ought' depends on no more special sense of words than the one that occurs because of my relation to the piano, to the act of keeping it tuned and to the person I am holding responsible.

This more general defense and revision of elements of aesthetic and ethical discourse began already in his dissertation, the middle sections of which became chapters of his most ambitious book, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (OUP 1979). This work led Cavell to revisit and to clarify certain specific aesthetic and ethical terms (like 'intention', 'paraphrase', 'form', and 'rules'). His approach to ethics and aesthetics was blended into his early essays on Austin and Wittgenstein, which in turn became the first chapters

of his first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (CUP 1969). And that book in turn was part of a decades-long re-reading of Wittgenstein as everywhere contesting the grip of a skeptical understanding of knowledge and its success and failure.

Cavell's account of skepticism paints it as a consequence of our disappointment in the success of knowledge. It is as if we would rather deny knowledge than accept such a fragile, human thing as what we know of the world and of others. Skepticism must not simply be defeated but allowed to play out its story – and not just in philosophy but in the world of human culture. It is in literature and above all in Shakespeare that we see the consequences of demanding and disowning knowledge (the 'ocular proof') but also the possibility that we sometimes have is what knowledge is like in a world of artifice and accident.

The keystone of this project is hinted at in "Knowing and Acknowledgment" (in *Must We Mean What We Say?*). The utterance "I know you are in pain" is relayed back from knowledge to the acknowledgment that the sentence more immediately expresses. Put more strongly, it is only under very specialized circumstances that "I know you are in pain" is merely a proposition about my cognitive relation to the state of your being well or ill. Uttering the sentence acknowledges my relation to your pain – in particular, that I have one – though it does not dictate what I go on to do or feel. I can concoct a purely cognitive meaning for this sentence, independent of the fact of my response (or lack of response): "I know you are pain but I can't give you an anesthetic until the doctor checks your lungs." To reduce the utterance to stating a purely cognitive state and strip it of the component implication that I stand in a relation to you as well as to your pain is not just to distort language but to distort what my knowing your pain is.

Knowledge without the substance of acknowledgment is not the knowledge of pain. Such an assertion of knowledge would have nothing to be about – nothing that is not the concoction of philosophers. Investigating why ordinary humans are so quick to concoct the same empty assertions about others as philosophers tend to do is what leads Cavell to the concluding sections of *The Claim of Reason* and to a large part of his work in the next several decades. It is one place to begin to think about Cavell's relation to politics, perhaps especially to the work of feminism and of anti-racism, undoing pictures of the other and of ourselves.

This insight about the priority of expression continues to spread throughout Cavell's work. It shows up centrally in his reconstruction of Wittgenstein's private language argument. That words do not mean something by an act of referring prior to human expression is, of course, one of Wittgenstein's signature moments. But Cavell takes this further by making explicit the need to explore the requirement of expression – or what he later names the "voice" – as prior to reference. For Cavell this is one of the paths that leads directly to literature, as if philosophy must learn from poems, paintings, and novels how we may refer to the simplest things – indeed, how we learn to name at all.

That human nature – like language – is partly composed of wishes, partly of conventions, and partly of aspirations (transcendental and otherwise) is an essential part of what opened up Cavell's interest in Kant, Thoreau, Emerson, and film. The possibility of a composite nature becoming intermittently whole (in a sense, complete or perfect) is what he calls perfectionism. But his work on Shakespeare and film also follows out some of the ways in which the drive to perfection or integrity can destroy itself or invite other forms of destructiveness. (His chapter on *Coriolanus* is central to this account.) Perfectionism is not for angels (or brutes), though it may be for those who have not yet seen the dangers of that desire for perfection.

Over the years – but especially in the months since he died – friends and students have been remembering stories and offering testimony of Stanley's apparently inexhaustible gifts for friendship and endless generosity towards other people's work. I have benefitted from both of these traits. I also confess I once made him laugh by reminding him, in roughly the words of Barbara Stanwyck in *The Lady Eve*, "I'm not your student for free, you know."

Once, when I was eighteen, he invited me to watch a movie from the projection booth at the Carpenter Center. Thrilled but desperate to say something of interest to him, I said "Isn't it kind of strange to watch a movie from a projection booth?" And he leaned towards me, out of the hearing of the others, and said, "Do you think we murder to dissect?" It was clearly a quote but I did not know from whom. It

was also clear that he was inviting me to enjoy a privileged moment and not to let my sense of propriety—my uptightness—get in the way. (Later I learned the line about dissection was from Wordsworth. Much later I learned that one of Stanley’s preoccupations was not letting our knowledge of how moments got made spoil our sense of their significance.)

There is also a side of Stanley which is less reported, a kind of sternness in his conversation that was passed down to me from a handful of graduate students in Emerson Hall, among other places. I am thinking of a remark of Stanley’s that I think I heard from Allen Graubard: “The unexamined life is probably not worth examining.” There is a high level of fierceness as well as fun in that sentence (though not necessarily fiercer than in Socrates’s original). Both appealed to my youthful anger at human torpor, partly no doubt at my own.

But it is the sweet spots I remember most. Sometimes it was his praise (which, like his smile, was well worth winning) and sometimes it was his rescuing a moment of disappointment with a brighter piece of his mind.

Returning from an interview for a Rhodes scholarship that I was pretty sure I wouldn’t get, I deflected my disappointment by telling Stanley that they had made it clear that volunteers and draftees could have their scholarships held over, but draft resisters could not. Anxiously and not without anger, I asked Stanley, what do I say to that? That is when I first heard him tell the once-famous Austin story about the bribe. Supposedly it was R.M. Hare who said, “If someone offered me a bribe, I would say ‘I do not take bribes on principle.’” Austin responded, “That’s very odd. I should have said, ‘No thank you.’” Stanley paused and said to me: “That’s what you say to the Rhodes people. ‘No thank you.’”

I did not take it as a put down of my moral principles or my political anger, nor of (all) academic moral philosophy. (I was months away from almost certainly being reclassified as 1A—eligible for the draft—and Stanley knew it.) I took it as a lesson about how and when you learn to say what you know you have to say—and to a very particular audience. He was teaching me how to decline something: how to say “no”. I am very glad that not all that much later I had a chance to show him that when you learn how to say “No thank you,” then “Thank you” becomes a lot easier to say.