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USING STANLEY CAVELL

by MICHAEL FISCHER

STANLEY CAVELL OFTEN SPEAKS of inheriting and carrying on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other writers. These writers help him move on in his own thinking, turning him around when he feels lost, provoking him when he gets discouraged or stuck. His indebtedness to J. L. Austin in the acknowledgements to *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969) captures one way he benefits from all the writers who have influenced him: "To the late J. L. Austin I owe, beyond what I hope is plain in my work, whatever is owed the teacher who shows one a way to do relevantly and fruitfully the thing one had almost given up hope of doing."¹ By taking up the work of the writers he values, Cavell hopes to undo what he sees as their neglect and misappropriation by the culture at large and by the academic profession. He makes his case for these writers not so much by exhortation as by his own use of them.

The impact of Cavell's own writing on his readers continues to unfold, as these three books attest. Each is a helpful collection of essays by scholars in various fields discussing his work. *Reading Cavell* includes

Contending with Stanley Cavell, edited by Russell B. Goodman, 205 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, \$45.00; *Reading Cavell*, edited by Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh, 262 pp. London: Routledge, 2006, \$120.00; *Stanley Cavell*, edited by Richard Eldridge, 260 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, \$24.99.

an essay by Cavell (“The Wittgensteinian Event”), as does *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (“Passionate and Performative Utterance: Morals of Encounter”), which also features a response by Cavell to the other essays in the volume.

The contributors in these three volumes all begin from the assumption that Cavell, like the writers who have influenced him, remains marginalized even though interest in his work has grown. But his isolation can be overstated. In an otherwise insightful essay on Cavell’s literary criticism (“The Avoidance of Stanley Cavell” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*), Garrett Stewart laments “the regrettable undercirculation of Cavell’s ideas” (p. 140) in literary studies and predicts that “mainstream literary scholars will increasingly have a hard time” with his writing—Stewart calls it “literary prose”—because it calls on reading skills that in the “epoch of cultural studies, discourse analysis, and the semiotics of social energy” have “atrophied” (p. 153). In the introduction to this same volume, Russell Goodman offers a more measured, less pessimistic assessment that gets Cavell’s peculiar professional status exactly right: “Cavell occupies a curious position in all the fields in which he works: he is at the same time a major figure and one whose work people do not quite know how to use” (p. 3).

In figuring out how to use Cavell, several contributors to these volumes begin by explicating his key ideas and texts. The writers in *Stanley Cavell* assess his contributions to several broad areas, including ethics, theory of action, philosophy of mind and language, aesthetics, and Shakespeare criticism. *Reading Cavell* and *Contending with Stanley Cavell* include essays on such central topics as his view of skepticism and his understanding of the ordinary. Of special note is Stephen Mulhall’s close reading of the opening of *The Claim of Reason*, “On Refusing to Begin,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*. One barrier to using Cavell remains his style, which readers either love or hate. Mulhall shows that the very features of Cavell’s writing that some readers find most annoying—for example, his penchant for complicating and qualifying even the apparently most obvious point—in fact instruct us in how to read him. Mulhall astutely describes *The Claim of Reason* and *Philosophical Investigations* as modernist texts written in the absence of philosophical conventions that the writers can take for granted. Such writing must resemble “a half-built edifice whose form acknowledges both its origin in ruins and the completion it foreshadows” (p. 32)—but never attains.

In addition to explicating Cavell, other contributors to these volumes extend his work to texts and issues he does not address. These extensions

are important because another impediment to the broader dissemination of Cavell's work is his eschewing a clear method that others can replicate. As Hilary Putnam notes in his contribution to *Reading Cavell* ("Philosophy as the Education of Grownups: Stanley Cavell and Skepticism"), "Stanley Cavell is one of the great minds of our time, but he is not a founder of movements or a coiner of slogans or a trader in 'isms' [but] a writer who always speaks to *individuals*—and that means, one at a time" (p. 119). In *Reading Cavell*, Nancy Bauer (in "How to do Things with Pornography") draws on his reading of Austin to rethink the debate over pornography; Paul Franks (in "The Discovery of the Other: Cavell, Fichte, and Skepticism") rereads post-Kantian philosophy, in particular Fichte, in light of Cavell's work on skepticism about other minds; and Stuart Klawans (in "Habitual Remarriage: The Ends of Happiness in *The Palm Beach Story*") takes up *The Palm Beach Story*, a movie mentioned by Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness* but never discussed. In each case, Cavell seems more interesting to me than the material he is called on to illuminate, but these extensions of his work successfully play off his own propensity for striking out in unanticipated directions.

Other contributors to these volumes elaborate on a social dimension of Cavell's work that takes shape slowly over the course of his writing, like a print emerging in a darkroom. In *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968), Northrop Frye noted the difficulty in romanticism "of incorporating a social theme with the theme of individual enlightenment": "Romanticism has brought into modern consciousness the feeling that society can develop or progress only by individualizing itself, by being sufficiently tolerant and flexible to allow an individual to find his own identity within it, even though in doing so he comes to repudiate most of the conventional values of that society."² Following Emerson's critique of conformity, Cavell has consistently carried on the romantic effort of putting pressure on social institutions—most prominently, the academic profession of philosophy—to accommodate individual voices. But a concern for community has also always been important to him, not just as an antagonist or backdrop but as an elusive, sometimes even shadowy goal.

What Cavell once wrote about modern art in *Must We Mean What We Say?* also applies to his early writing: "It promises us, not the reassembly of community, but personal relationships unsponsored by that community; not the overcoming of our isolation, but the sharing of that isolation—not to save the world out of love, but to save love for the world, until it is responsive again" (p. 229). On this account, an individual feels

isolated, or estranged from an unresponsive community, then discovers that his or her isolation can be shared with another person, in friendship, love, or the experience of art, thus preserving love for a still unyielding world. How (or whether) the community will become responsive again remains less clear than the isolation it fosters.

In *Must We Mean What We Say?* the experience of art provides a model for how an ordinary language philosopher moves from self-examination to broader claims about what we ordinarily say. The process parallels speaking with a universal voice, in Kant's phrase, while making a personal aesthetic judgment. As Richard Eldridge describes the insights of ordinary language philosophy in his excellent introduction to *Reading Cavell*, "Such utterances are *claims* all at once to self-knowledge (of what one would say when), to community (to what *we* would say when), and to reason (to what it makes sense to say when)" (p. 6). The community invoked here, however, remains abstract. In his contribution to *Reading Cavell* ("Cavell on American Philosophy and the Idea of America"), Eldridge goes to cite two statements by William James, also quoted by Cavell, that track the give-and-take movement between the individual and the community that Cavell sets in motion.³ The first statement makes the Emersonian point that "the community stagnates without the impulse of the individual." The second statement reminds us that "the impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community" (p. 176). In Cavell's early writing, as I have suggested, an individual discovers sympathy in another person—in a friend, a lover (for example, the couples in *Pursuits of Happiness*), a teacher (Austin for Cavell), in unforeseen moments of connection and attunement. It remains unclear, however, whether these personal relationships represent the stirrings of a new community or the remnants of a disappointing, still unchanged given one (or both). Again, there are strong romantic precedents for this question. I think especially of William Wordsworth after the failure of the French Revolution reconstituting his world in *The Prelude* around his relationships with his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his sister Dorothy. It remains uncertain, even at times to Wordsworth, whether he is thereby escaping the larger world or still working to change it.

In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990), the political form of life that Cavell champions, the community most responsive to the creative impulses of individuals, comes into focus as democracy. Achieving this community means taking responsibility for the long-standing promise and fitful achievement of democracy in America. Again following Emerson and Thoreau, Cavell embraces as an essential goal of his

philosophical work thinking through what it means to be an American and responding to the vexed fate of democracy in his country. In his contribution to *Stanley Cavell*, Stanley Bates quotes the key passage from *Conditions*: “If there is a perfectionism not only compatible with democracy but necessary to it, it lies not in excusing democracy for its inevitable failures, or looking to rise above them, but in teaching how to respond to those failures, and to one’s compromise by them, otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal” (p. 42). In his response to *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, Cavell adds urgency to this obligation of criticizing democracy from within: “The thought, panic-struck, is that there may be no longer an America, not because of its global dispersion, but because the idea of democracy, of inclusive, equitable, mutual legislation, cannot be mocked indefinitely without beginning to disappear” (p. 167).

Two of the most promising essays in these three volumes take up this challenge of strengthening American democracy in our own anxious time. In “The Recovery of Greece and the Discovery of America” (*Reading Cavell*), James Conant deplores the stalemate between “patriots” and “intellectuals” in contemporary American politics—the paralyzing rift between “ineffectual oppositionalism without any critical bite” and “all too effectual jingoism, ready to take a bit out of just about anything” (p. 247), between a “politics of bloodless abstraction and critical detachment” and “one of bloody reaction and unreflective entrenchment” (p. 247). Expanding on Cavell’s Emersonian claim that America exists only in its discovery, as an ongoing project rather than accomplished fact, Conant explores “finding a way, first, to tell us, such that we are able to hear it, that we no longer understand the forms of words we call upon to articulate the promise of America, and, second, to demonstrate that these very words, their present apparent expressive impotence notwithstanding, can still be called upon, in speaking of America, to say something we are still able to understand and believe” (p. 238). In a related essay, (“Cavell and the Concept of America” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*), Conant highlights the striking post 9/11 relevance of Cavell’s 1967 essay on *King Lear*, composed in the grip of the Vietnam War, also a time when America had to “overcome fantasies of its own impotence in order to believe in itself (and thus become itself)” (p. 72). By seizing on untapped possibilities of social criticism in Cavell, Conant heads in a direction that others are sure to follow, especially in times of political stress and discouragement.

Even as the contributors to these volumes elaborate on different ways of using Cavell, I am struck by how none of them discusses teaching

him, even though at least one of them, Nancy Bauer, credits her respect for his work to his powerful teaching. Teaching a text, particularly to undergraduates, may still be the surest way of bringing a writer's work before new audiences, especially younger readers. Professors are public intellectuals most obviously in the classroom. Many of us, however, still shy away from discussing pedagogical matters. Complicating the use of Cavell in the classroom, his writing is still under-anthologized, partly because his contributions to different disciplines remain unassimilated, partly because each of his essays is intertwined with his work as a whole, not to mention the writers he draws on. Sampling him in an English department course on Shakespeare, for example, potentially puts the class in touch with unfamiliar figures such as Wittgenstein, much as introducing Cavell in a philosophy course can bring along American movies. Instead of adding to a course, the excerpt from Cavell (thoroughly studied) thus risks eclipsing it, one week's assignment becoming the whole course. In thinking about teaching Cavell, numerous institutional factors come into play adding to the difficulty of his writing, among them our dependency on anthologies and surveys in introductory courses, the challenges of interdisciplinary teaching, and students' sometimes consumerist expectations of the humanities. Cavell himself has commented often on the challenges of teaching philosophy and he has called one of his most wide-ranging books, *City of Words*, a book "born in a classroom."⁴ His interest in teaching deserves more attention than it gets in these volumes.

The reception of Cavell's work will finally depend on his individual readers. In responding to the essays in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, Cavell notes that while familiarity with his work continues to grow, some might nevertheless see him as the victim of "unfortunate timing" (p. 175)—writing books that readers are not yet ready for (one of his friends called *The Claim of Reason* a "book for the next generation"), invoking writers such as Austin just when they seem passé. Although Cavell grasps the costs of being marginalized, he also notes how "being odd, and staying odd" has its pleasures, including "remaining, however precariously, contemporary" (p. 176). Work that was never in fashion seems more available for discovery than noisier work caught up in the trends of the day. I am often struck by how readers of Cavell keep surfacing where one might least expect them, among painters, directors, and poets as well as university professors and students of literature, film, and philosophy. I am confident that his writing will continue to provoke all kinds of readers interested in personal as well as social change.

Contending with Stanley Cavell, Reading Cavell, and Stanley Cavell will help new readers as they get started with his work and more experienced readers as they carry it on.

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1. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. xiii. Subsequent references are inserted in the text. Even as Cavell speaks of salvaging love in this passage, he has also attended to the pressures destroying it, most notably in Shakespearean tragedy. Here the skeptical denial of our shared existence is “revealed as lethal, not a murderer of the world exactly, but the dealer of those small deaths of everyday slights, stuttered hesitations of acknowledgment, studied reductions or misdirections of gratitude, that kill intimacy and maim social existence” (“Responses,” *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, p. 159).
2. Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968; rpt. University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 48. Along similar lines, Stephen Mulhall in “Suffering a Sea Change: Crisis, Catastrophe, Convention in the Theory of Speech Acts” notes that “Cavell sees in this human mode of criterially governed interaction a way in which the search for community can be prosecuted without the sacrifice of individuality” (*Reading Cavell*, p. 38).
3. The two statements appear in capital letters in the lobby of William James Hall at Harvard. Cavell quotes them in “Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe),” *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 105.
4. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 163.