

Reflections on a Life of Philosophy

An Interview with Stanley Cavell

HRP: I thought we might begin with a question on Wittgenstein. In 1996, you and Professor Richard Moran taught a course together on your book, *The Claim of Reason*. If I am not mistaken, this was your first serious and systematic rereading of that book since its publication. It also represents a return to your defining encounter with Wittgenstein. Why this return and how is this return significant?

Cavell: You are right, it is the first serious and systematic rereading of that book since it was published. The “why” question is an interesting one for me, I’ve asked [it] myself. I don’t want it to be swamped by the fact that there is a straight practical answer. I have been wanting for a while to offer this book as part of the offerings in the Philosophy department at Harvard. If someone has written a big book in any department, it is very likely to get into their teaching. I never found a way to do that. And the presence of a young teacher new to the department was a chance. One day Richard Moran and I were talking, and I asked if he might be interested. The chance to hear a young, different voice from my own responding to this material seemed to me the right kind of context for me to do it.

With this book, more extremely than with anything else I have written, any other time I had thought of teaching it, I couldn’t teach what I had written, since it is not an exact science, since it is not logic; I don’t want to be a policeman about whether somebody has got it right or not. From a teacher’s point of view, of course, I care about that. But from a writer’s point of view, any response gives me something to think about; why a particular response has been sparked in another human breast is something I want to know. Technically, that makes for some troubles. The chance to hear the words coming back, slightly alienated, was another feature. They are two other, external features — are they external? — they all have tremendous reverberations inside me.

[In 1997] the French translation of *The Claim of Reason* came out. I worked on this project, at various times over the past ten or twelve years as the translation was in progress, as it was halted and delayed, thinking about these passages in another language — which is extremely interesting to do, and another

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source of the right sort of alienation — so that I could bring the thing back and reexperience what was going on in the text, as someone sometimes surprised, sometimes delighted, sometimes someone much less than delighted.

The other thing is, it [was] my last term teaching and, as a certain sort of way of saying goodbye to the official part of teaching, it seemed to me a way to go back all over everything in my life, in my publishing life, since *The Claim of Reason* reaches deeply into my Ph.D. thesis and is still a part of the latest things that I do. So, if there were one text of mine that, in winding things down, I would go to, that would be it.

What I am not answering is why I felt ready to do it, even felt that it might be a creative thing to do, and the last chance to do something in the classroom, one that I am used to and have made my home, my last chance to do that and listen to that book through those sensibilities. I didn't want to miss that experience. I hope, I feel, that I am profiting from doing this.

HRP: Your encounter with Wittgenstein is an encounter with his *Philosophical Investigations*. Why do you withhold comment on his other later writings, such as *On Certainty*, or *Lectures on Religious Belief*, or *Culture and Value*? Do you find them somehow inferior to the *Investigations*?

Cavell: I didn't respond to that first part of your first question. I don't find that teaching the course on *The Claim of Reason*, for all the extent to which that text of mine is a commentary on passages from the *Investigations*, is taking me back to Wittgenstein. Probably the reason is that — in a sense — I've never really left Wittgenstein. It is always close or always about to explode. So, why not other later work? That's a good question, it avoids the question of why not the early work as well. I take your point kindly.

So let me give you an exception to that. I have specifically written miscellanea in journal entries [in *Culture and Value*] on two occasions, but one specifically, a very late piece, just written two or three years ago, the first time that I have tried writing on Wittgenstein in a systematic way. In this piece of

mine, I relate it directly to German romanticism. But that partly tells the tale I have about this. I don't feel compelled to go back or on with Wittgenstein, but when a small piece of lightning strikes, I welcome it and I am glad to follow where it leads. Or when someone pushes me to do it, I am happy to. Or when someone tells me that Wittgenstein is a neo-pragmatist, or words to that effect, I am glad, as I just did in a little paper that I gave at a pragmatist conference, [to] raise the question about that. I don't regard myself as a Wittgenstein scholar, and I don't continue to be fascinated by what he can do philosophically past the point that that life-changing fascination came over me with respect to the *Investigations*. Almost everything that has been pushed at me has seemed to me to be in the *Investigations*.

That won't be true of the mathematics, but I say a couple of things about the mathematics in *The Claim of Reason*, and I say it to the extent that I think I have anything new and useful to say about it. *I don't feel compelled to go back or on with Wittgenstein, but when a small piece of lightning strikes, I welcome it and I am glad to follow where it leads.* Now I am sure that any one of those other texts would interest and inspire me, but I didn't find that about *On Certainty*, as much as I liked some things in it. But it seems to me in comparison with the *Investigations* — but why compare to the *Investigations*? I compare it only because for me to become absorbed in it, it's going to have to be different in some way. I am not interested, I find, in simply noting minor differences or minor advances in this way or that way. But I have friends and any of them could get me into one of these texts if they wanted to. Nobody has really urged me and, partly, I am so aware of how many other things I haven't read and thought about, that I let that sway me at the moment.

My interest in Shakespeare, for example, is exploding so fast again and in so many regions, some of which will come back to Wittgenstein. Since I have time, I am letting that take me that way. The odd connection with Wittgenstein is punctuated later. There is a piece of mine, a rather late piece, on Wittgenstein as a philosopher of culture that I was extremely happy to be writing. It was an assignment that I liked, given by some Wittgensteinians who had asked if I had thought about it; and I hadn't, and I wanted to. And when the idea dawned on me of how to go about thinking about his writing in terms of comparing him to writings, especially of Schlegel (for what reason that became a possibility I won't go into) I profited from it. But if it's without passion, it's not going to call upon me just out of completeness to do it. I had a full say, I feel, about the *Investigations*, and I want other people tell me whether I need to say more.

HRP: How do you feel about the appropriation of Wittgenstein as a philosopher of religion? Are you pleased by anything that you have seen in that area?

Cavell: It's a very hard question for me to answer. I haven't seen anything exactly that I am pleased by. I'm not very up on most of the secondary literature about the later philosophy. I'm embarrassed to say that, but my stuff about it began very early — I'm stuck in my generation in this respect. My review of the Blue and Brown Books was by most standards really early in the Wittgenstein game in this

culture. It was, I don't know, 35 years ago when I wrote "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" and what I said there was something I haven't had to retract. It means that the path that I set out on heavily in my dissertation is the path that I've taken through Wittgenstein's work.

That means that path was taken with having read comparatively few really good things that I knew, that were offered to me that were in the field then, and I haven't searched out other people to disagree with. Of course, I think Wittgenstein should beckon someone with religious instincts or callings or theological wishes. He says so, in some obvious ways. Students of his have said so in some obvious way and one can read it in his texts.

I don't mean to be over fastidious. I feel such inclinations in the *Investigations*, and it is there that I have to test out on myself what bearing I think he might have on religious interests of my own. When he becomes comparatively casual but always interesting, explicitly on the topic of religion — I'm glad that you ask me if I'm happy about it — I'm glad for people to respond to it. I don't feel puritanical about their having to *earn* every single syllable they say about the religious by having to work their way through all the other texts of Wittgenstein. But, it's going to be hard for me to much interested in it, if the advance doesn't come in that sort of way. Now I say this also in ignorance of a great deal of work that has been done. At my age you have to be specific with me, somebody has got to put a theological reading of Wittgenstein in my hands and say, "Here, you haven't thought of that, have you?" and then I will gladly look at it.

HRP: A question about Moral Perfectionism. Stephen Mulhall, who has taken a great interest in your work, says of the perfectionist thinking of such figures as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Emerson and Thoreau that it often shades into and is shadowed by religious thinking. Where does Moral Perfectionism encounter religion and what is the tone of that encounter? Is religion left behind or does perfectionism become a sort of religion?

Cavell: Well, the idea of Emersonian Perfectionism is certainly one for me that invokes philosophy, not simply in connection with life — as it sometimes called for by people exasperated with academic philosophy, they want it to have some *bearing*, as they put it, on the way we live — but even more startling, philosophy itself as a *way* of life. And both those relations of philosophy to the way one lives are in Emerson and, in that way, he picks up a very large, long, fascinating, honorable tradition of philosophical thinking. It is in itself no more religious than it is — did you offer the possibility of a substitute for religion? — I don't know that I'd say quite a substitute for religion, but it becomes a part of philosophy's quarrel with religion, a quarrel or competition with religion in forming some basis for human existence. Emerson, after all, left the pulpit when he was in his early thirties. And there the way he speaks of not believing in the Last Supper, the way he later denies the importance of the person of Jesus, and nevertheless, despite all, recommends a form of life that clearly has religious undertones, to say the least, in it, is, was, a fas-

ination for me. But this is a development of my general interest in Emerson, when I couldn't leave it alone, and it was not the first thing that interested me.

What occurred to me about Emerson, when I asked, kept pressing upon myself the question, "What is attracting me over and over? Every time I finish one piece, something else grabs me, and I have to keep going back to it — why?" The fact that it seemed to underlie the writing of both Wittgenstein and Heidegger I found extraordinary — why extraordinary? No doubt due to my interest in them — that this aspect of Emerson occurred to me. But that Emerson allows me to see a connection that deep in Wittgenstein and Heidegger, to call *Being and Time* and the *Investigations* — let's just stay with those two — perfectionist works says, first of all, something I have already said I think significant about their connection with one another. And "significant" is based on each text saying something about each of them as authors, each of them placing a certain kind of demand on their readers that most philosophical texts don't place. Is that connection one that I also believe to have religious aspects, undertones, undersongs, overtones to it? Whether I said yes or no to that, I would say yes to something as explaining something that each Heidegger and Wittgenstein have to claim or have to deny about their work.

Wittgenstein claims about his work that it has certain religious aspirations. This was reported by young friends and pupils — his young friends were pupils. You could also take it, and as one of my later essays does, to account specifically for what everybody recognizes to be the fervor of the writing in the *Investigations*. I raise the question whether that fervor is religious or whether it can be understood morally. But in the case of perfectionist writing, that is exactly a difference that is not only hard to draw, but that you are almost dared to try to draw. It doesn't exactly require transcendent beliefs, but it certainly does require commitments about a responsiveness to one's own existence that most modern philosophy texts, anyway, don't, unless you find a way that they do, which I am not at all averse to. To find, for example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as deep a therapeutic impulse as in the *Investigations* wouldn't hurt my feelings.

Heidegger, far from encouraging people to think of his work in this way, over and over in *Being and Time* denies that it is an ethical work. But he denies it so many times that you wonder why he has to go on denying this, and certainly he has to, from my point of view, since over and over and over again, I kept feeling that that's what this is. I was finally able to put my finger on exactly what I thought that meant by the time I came to write the introduction to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, which is the place where I actually broached the issue of Emersonian Perfectionism. That that view of Emerson also explained to me something absolutely essential to what my dedication to writing about film was and is a further contribution to what I think it means.

HRP: In your writing from the late 80s and early 90s, you take a serious interest in the Heidegger's thought. For many philosophers, Heidegger is a taboo figure due to his involvement with the Nazi party. I was wondering if you could tell us how you make sense of Heidegger's philosophy in light of his politics. This problem seems to beckon a larger question: how do you understand the relationship between a philosopher's life and his writing?

Cavell: You're not expecting me to answer that whole question? Let me see if I can

have some go at it. Even if I weren't as interested in what of Heidegger's writing that I've read as I am, given my commitment to understand the reach between philosophy as its known in Europe and philosophy as its known in the English-speaking world, I am bound to have tried to do something with Heidegger. No European philosopher (with so few exceptions that they become fascinating if you're interested — like the exception of Jankalavich in France, a marvelous thinker, a wonderful writer, but who because of his shunning of Heidegger on the political grounds that you mention refused to read anything in German, [rendering] his writing unwell, obscure, unknown) — has failed to.

I wasn't willing not to know Heidegger. I am not willing, though it costs me pain, not to read Heidegger, knowing his past, or knowing something of his past, not knowing what to make of his past. I don't have any answer to what the relation of a philosopher's writing, or anybody's writing, is to a philosopher's life, or anybody's life, is. But in the figural, I don't think that the relation of a philosopher to his writing is dismissable even if the relation of a scientist's life to his writing is dismissable — I doubt that too. But in the case of Heidegger, you have the most extreme case in which not only is a philosopher involved in distasteful and ultimately malevolent politics, but you have one whose philosophy looks like, can be mistaken for, that malevolent politics. There are times when Heidegger's language approaches the language in which Nazism can be described — making ultimate commitments set by a larger unity. There are chilling, to use a pretty term for it, passages in Heidegger.

Now if Heidegger is one of the main voices of philosophy, one of the main presences of philosophy, in the twentieth century, and if the fact of Nazism is one of the definitive facts of the twentieth century, which I hope I believe not just because I have to, because I'm a Jew, then since a way to study both Heidegger and Nazism is one indispensable way to try to determine what their relation is to one another, in particular, how Heidegger's work can be in certain of its fringes mistaken for Nazistic aspirations for a culture — without the anti-semitism, let that be a side-issue, though it was not a side-issue — then there is another way in which I feel stuck with having to read and look at both, to the extent that I

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can. I have a weak stomach. I am stuck with having to make what I can of Heidegger, and that is that his Nietzsche lectures — which set the standard for Nietzsche interpretation, *the* work of Nietzsche interpretation to which every European philosopher who is interested in Nietzsche, and there are very few who are not, has had to respond — are lectures in which Heidegger recommends especially the young Nietzsche to our attention, and that young Nietzsche is the Nietzsche most nakedly indebted to the writings of Emerson.

So in 1936, Heidegger is giving endlessly influential interpretations of words, some of which, though he didn't know it, were Emerson's. That is something I'm stuck with, that I want to know about, as I want to know that Thoreau's

Walden is interpreted by next to no philosophical work more intimately than by certain texts of Heidegger. I cite the essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” but the other essays equally. Because it also a perfectionist work, more generally by *Being and Time*. But this connection with Thoreau, whom I regard as a philosophical genius and an American genius and one whom I have been inspired by and intend to become inspired again by — if I’m lucky — I can’t avoid wanting to know how this happened.

So far as Heidegger’s cursed fate is concerned and his damnation to have lived in a time when he was called forth by and associated in this tyrannical movement, it is blind not to see that philosophy is as such brought into question by Heidegger’s fall and not just the peculiar exempted writing of this man. To the extent to which you really have inherited Western philosophy — not the only way of inheriting philosophy but one genuine inheritance of a major part of Western philosophy — that philosophy, even when Heidegger regards it as an error and distracted, is playing a role in Heidegger’s own thought and therefore in making this connection between philosophy and tyranny.

HRP: Film has been at the center of your attention since the early 70s, but recently in *A Pitch of Philosophy* and some courses you’ve taught, you have turned your attention to opera. What do you find philosophically interesting in opera and how does this relate to your interest in film?

Cavell: I’m afraid I’m going to say some formulaic, canned things about this. Can I avoid this? What I’ve said before is that opera and film bear internal relations to one another — in the fact that each was invented in deliberate manner and function, in the level of emotion to which they both appeal, to the range of audiences to which they appeal. Film, I have said in the epigraph to my most recent book on melodrama, is made for philosophy; it shifts or puts different light on whatever philosophy has said about appearance and reality, about actors and characters, about skepticism and dogmatism, about presence and absence.

I don’t quite believe that opera was, in that sense, made for philosophy, though it should fascinate philosophers — should I say more than it does? It has fascinated philosophers of the magnitude of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard — that will do. But as you know, the fact of opera and the celebration of the human voice, so one could say, in the call of opera in the beginning of the time of the great tragedies of Shakespeare, a fact that I don’t want to be lost on me, means that my own sense of philosophy, not only of celebrating, but of deploring the human voice in its efforts to rid it of its indecipherable moments, of its vagueness, of its evanescence, is something I have thought

that the fact of opera might bear on. And having had one go at writing about it, I am still thinking about that. Something I haven't talked about, which I'm also very much thinking about, is, to adapt the first question you asked me, why opera so recently in my own life? And that I regard as a hopeful sign as it takes me back to my earliest interests in my life, which are interests in music. That music should be the art that, with major exceptions, should be least systematically treated by aestheticians, poses a challenge, poses a caution that I seem willing to take on.

I suppose I should say that the next thing that I am thinking about — I don't know why I am moved to say this — but, as you know, as a direct consequence of having given a course on opera, at least as ancient an interest as my interest in opera, probably more ancient, is my interest in American musical comedy. And so again I am led, taking steps across invisible stones in the water, to ask my questions about that, which is: what kind of talent, what kind of culture, expresses

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itself in that way? What kind of people have the talent to perform in it? Who writes it? It's not just popular art. It's not high art. But it is a popular high art of a sort of high popularity that America is known for being able to create. These matters that were for years dismissable, like musical comedy and like jazz, dismissable as film used to be, are becoming less dismissable.

that a part of my life-long commitment to philosophy has been a life-long commitment to trying to find a way to write in a way that I cared about, in a way that I seemed always to know about. To use philosophy as a medium within which to write, especially to write work that would be acceptable and within earshot of English-speaking analytic philosophers seems a perverse and last place to look. For me, for various reasons, however, it has been inspiring. I hope it continues to be. Just to look at the American connection with opera, you may remember that I opened the opera course [at Harvard University] by asking how an American could hope to claim the depth of experience of opera, to write about it usefully, given the fact that America is not a culture that has produced opera until very recently on anything like the scale that matches the productions of the cultures of Italy, Germany, and France.

To ask me, therefore, what my interests in such things as jazz and musical comedy are is to ask me what my interest in America is, and that question is really all over my work now, and I want it to be, and I want to be able to say something more about it. What it is, though, is a confession

HRP: You were here at Harvard in the 60s during the student movement. How did these times strike you? How do they strike you today? What has stayed with you from those years?

Cavell: Surely the 60s were formative times for many people whose lives were centered in the university. It was the place from which to experience that event. But primarily it was the fact that virtually all of my young friends, virtually every student

that I spoke to, whether they were in favor of student activity or not, were having their lives molded by this, and I experienced that and they experienced that. One could not, I felt, take the kind of interest, which is, after all, my business to have in what the young are thinking, without immersing myself in that experience, partly through identification but partly, explicitly, through a certain distancing.

Part of my role in those years was to maintain precisely a shared imagination with the young and also some way of presenting a possible distance from what they were feeling as a way of remembering something America was supposed to be doing and still could do, that they had *not* in their lifetimes experienced. I have this image of hurling myself into the middle of any conversation to try to split the difference between the two sides. Sometimes, I got rather bruised in the effort, sometimes it worked. But the sense of closeness to what was tearing apart these young people and the pain it cost me that they did not know an America that I thought I knew and *that* country was losing itself, was so painful that I found the something to do about it, namely, that it was then that I rediscovered Emerson and Thoreau.

I didn't know then that that was why I rediscovered them. I wasn't holding up Thoreau as the original flower child. It hadn't occurred to me exactly that Thoreau was some favorite of the generation of the sixties until much later. I discovered Thoreau explicitly because I assigned it to a group of visiting foreign scholars — European, Asian, South American scholars — with whom I

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was doing a summer seminar on the classics of American thought. Nevertheless, it was in this period, it was in the period when you just felt you were going crazy trying to imagine what possible good all this slaughter can be doing. The foreign interest was almost as avid as that expressed by young American students interested in Emerson and Thoreau. Everybody, it seemed, was trying to find an earlier or different American face from the one that it was showing the world in that moment, wanted to think better of America than, so to speak, America was asking it to think of itself in that awful period. And it was an unforgettable experience of the discovery of these marvels and the discovery of the follies that somehow the marvels were related to — was it the arrogance? Was it the ecstasy of innocence that felt it could do anything? What was this? Living through it with the students I cared about permanently marked me, I wouldn't have it any other way. To say more about it we'd have to go on in detail. I think I do detect still a difference — and not always a happy difference, something like an unbridgeable distance, a cold distance — between those of my generation who went through it in closeness with the students as opposed of those who fairly consistently disapproved — as I sometimes did — of what was happening, who thought it was agony, anguish. I begin to think of too many stories that I have to put aside when beginning to talk about it. For better or worse, we are all changed by it. Its experience has not died. It did something somehow to the culture, for better and worse, nothing else could have done and we are still paying for its backlash. I think that's by now a common view. We probably should have to pay for it

too — there were excesses on all sides.

HRP: You have mentioned twice already this place called “America.” What is this America and what is its privileged position today? I mean not its position in academic philosophy per se, but its position in a tradition of thinking of which Emerson and Thoreau are exemplars.

Cavell: You said not particularly academic, but given what I do, I think of it first in those terms. A minimum answer, I expect, is that America is the place where philosophy and literature exist in a different relation to one another than they do in any other culture that I know much about. Simply the fact that its great founding novels, as I’ve said before, picked up the metaphysical aspirations that were not being accounted for — anything like the European development of academic philosophy didn’t exist here until a certain moment.

That’s a quasi-professional aspect of an answer. The other is — is it too late in the day to expect that there is a sense of social experimentation that is unlike the projects of other cultures? We’re not still coming out of a colonial past. We’re not coming out of a monarchical past. One feels that some possibility of experimenting with the manifestations of justice is still open to us. The fact that we have an outstanding racial problem is a task that, at my most romantic, I feel will be a mark of a great social achievement if it can be made more tractable, or continue to be made — I don’t think that there have been no advances — more tractable than it has been.

Somebody like me who comes from a New England family can hardly not be fascinated by a thing I’ve actually called a part of the American difference in philosophy as registered in the writing of Thoreau and Emerson. Namely, their willingness for departure, for what they call abandonment, for what they call onwardness, in short, for an embracing of the condition of immigration in their lives. It struck me in my earliest thinking about Emerson that he reversed the Heideggerian emphasis on learning to dwell where you are, reversed the emphasis and insisted on learning to leave where you are, which in part means willing it to allow it to change, willing to allow it to change you, and able to allow yourself to present yourself so that it changes. That’s a remarkable aspiration for a culture and its leading thinkers to set for themselves. ¶