The Senses of Stanley Cavell

Edited by
RICHARD FLEMING and MICHAEL PAYNE
Beginning Cavell

Arnold Davidson

University of Chicago

Since the publication of Must We Mean What We Say? in 1969, it has been said that Stanley Cavell's books are unreviewable, a remark that will no doubt again be applied to his latest work.* This remark has been repeated too often, by too many distinguished and distinctive philosophers, to be simply false, but neither should it be taken as flatterly true. His work is explicitly meant to raise the question of what philosophical thought and writing is, and hence the question of what it is to review such thought. It is true enough that the essays in this book do not yield to standard philosophical review, which consists in the statement of an essay's thesis with the arguments used to establish and support this thesis, and the elaboration of counterexamples intended to force a modification in the initial thesis. Cavell's essays do not employ arguments in the service of theses designed to solve philosophical problems, and the use of counterexamples inspired by such argumentation, a dominant technique of contemporary analytical philosophy, seems irrelevant as a form of critique of his claims. Cavell's awareness of his differences from the practices of current Anglo-American professional philosophy causes him more than once to attempt a characterization of what he wishes philosophy to be. In the first essay of this book, in the context of addressing the claim that philosophy and film share no common border, he says that he understands philosophy as a "willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape. . . . Such thoughts are instances of that characteristic human willingness to allow questions for itself which it cannot answer with satisfaction. Cynics about philosophy, and perhaps about humanity, will find that questions without answers are empty; dogmatists will claim to have arrived at answers; philosophers after my heart will rather wish to convey the thought that while there may be no satisfying answers to such questions in certain forms, there are, so to speak, directions to answers, ways to think, that are worth the time of your life to discover" (p. 9).

This characterization of philosophy should not appear as alien as it is sometimes made out to be. It is in fact an amplification or variation of Kant's claim in the Critique of Pure Reason: "Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, is it not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer." But whereas Kant views this fate as leading to illusion, antimony, and paralysis, Cavell sees it also as a source of something positive, a virtue of philosophical thought, even if it can degenerate into a vice. His concept of philosophy is most obviously opposed to the picture of philosophy "as a more or less technical discipline reserved for specialists," a picture that has recently come under increasing attack from very different quarters, most notably in the writings of Hilary Putnam, a philosopher of unimpeachable technical accomplishment. Throughout these essays, Cavell worries aloud about how his hopes for philosophy can be met in the institutional practice of philosophy, more specifically about whether directions to answers, ways to think, "are teachable, in ways suited to what we think of as schools": hence one dimension of the title Themes Out of School. These speculations reveal his unflagging awareness of the difficulty of his writing, although his essays are certainly no more difficult than those of Jacques Derrida, or than every third article in the Journal of Philosophy. They are, however, difficult in a different way from both Derrida and technical analytical philosophy, and his book calls on one to formulate a typology of philosophical difficulty, to account for the different kinds of difficulty to which philosophical thought can submit itself. Reading his essays does require a continuous concentration, but they are aimed at those for whom the pleasure of the text is not a mere literary slogan. This book consists of twelve essays, most of which develop and extend concerns found in Cavell's two previous books, The Claim of Reason and Pursuits of Happiness. Since these essays are not amen-

*Although written as a review of Cavell's Themes Out of School: Causes and Effects (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), I hope this essay can serve as a more general introduction to his thought. This review article originally appeared in the London Review of Books, 20 December 1984, pp. 17-18.
able to summary, I will consider portions of a few of them, each of which, in a different way, begins with the question of Cavell’s relation to the present practice of a different discipline: history, philosophy, film studies, and literary theory.

“The Ordinary as the Uneventful (A Note on the Annales Historians)” originated as a response to Paul Ricoeur’s critique of the Annales historians’ attempt to produce what he called “eventless” history. Ricoeur’s argument is that history cannot be eventless, since it is tied to narrative discourse which requires the concept of an event. Cavell’s response to this argument embodies one of his most remarkable capacities, his ability to get inside a position and uncover its motivations, as if he were a diagnostician of the spirit in which things are said. After admitting that he has not read enough of the Annales historians to provide an expert’s opinion of how they understand themselves, he says: “I can still go on to do something philosophers typically do in the absence of a command of the facts: I can ask what such a self-understanding might look like, and I can do that in the guise of asking myself what I would mean if I claimed that there is a history of the human being to which we are blinded by the traditional histories of flashing, dramatic events” (p. 190). Cavell’s concern is that the life of the ordinary man and woman may not be perceived so long as our historical interest is dictated by “high events.” With such a concern, a desire to turn away from events as made by exceptional people is a turning toward a history of the unexceptional, a desire to interest oneself differently in human existence. And this different interest will manifest a competing conception of the human being and of what it is to know human existence. So Cavell proposes that “such a history is interested not in what Ricoeur calls the eventless, as though it seeks, as it were, what is not happening; such a history is interested rather in the uneventful, seeking, so to speak, what is not out of the ordinary” (p. 193). He finds this interest in Emerson’s and Thoreau’s concern for the common, the low, the near, and even in the return of Wittgenstein and Austin to ordinary language; moreover, the perception of the ordinary, the unexceptional and eventless, is, for Cavell, one of the domains opened up by film. It is evidence in favor of his proposal for understanding the Annales school that the first volume of Ferdinand Braudel’s Civilization and Capitalism: 15th-18th Century is entitled The Structures of Everyday Life.

This seemingly slight modulation from the eventless to the uneventful makes all the difference between something missing and something gained. The eventless is a lack, something of definite importance not taking place. But the uneventful is the stuff of our daily lives, without which we would have no history. In effect, Cavell’s response to Ricoeur shows how, for all their good, certain kinds of theory—say, a theory of narrative discourse—may blind one to what is going on, more or less before one’s eyes. Ricoeur’s theoretical conceptions seem to force on him, to dictate to him, the concept of the eventless, whereas Cavell’s invocation of the uneventful comes from the place of intuition, and is a fine example of what I mean by calling him a diagnostician of the spirit in which things are said. Finally, there is the claim, implied by Ricoeur and advanced by others, that Annales history is anti-humanistic; how one judges this may be decisively influenced by slight modulations in the way one describes their enterprise. Consider, for instance, the interest of the Annales school in the history of climate. This interest is often taken to be a prime locale of their antihumanism. But despite their use of the apparatus of quantification, the Annales historians are, for example, interested, not in the history of drops of water, but in the history of rain. Rain is a concept sub specie humanitatis, and although it may be uneventful, it is, in Cavell’s words, a “significant lesser or shaper of human ends.” Cavell’s view of the Annales school as historians of the uneventful is a surprising and illuminating complement to his own philosophical quest for the ordinary.

“Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy,” originally published in 1964 and reprinted here with an extended introduction, is one of Cavell’s earliest pieces of writing. It introduces a theme that has become a permanent concern of his work: “The terms or categories in which a philosophy criticizes its competitors, and its culture, are an essential part of its positive achievement. But we should add immediately that what cannot be caught in those particular terms of criticism cannot be appreciated in that particular philosophy. The characteristic and specific differences of such terms of criticism are a principal theme of this essay, the principal way in which the various philosophical positions are distinguished” (p. 206). A detailed attention to how philosophers respond to one another, and, in “The Politics of Interpretation (Politics as Opposed to What?),” to how literary theory responds to philosophy, is one of Cavell’s most characteristic traits. It is perhaps most famously exemplified in “Austin at Criticism” (published in Must We Mean What We Say?), where an examination of J. L. Austin’s terms of criticism leads him to undo Austin’s claim that, in proposing a solution to a particular problem, G. E. Moore has made a mistake. As Cavell insists, one can accurately accuse
someone of making a mistake only when one can provide definite answers to questions such as, What mistake was made? What was mistaken for what? How can the mistake have occurred? and How could it have been prevented?—questions which do not have convincing answers when asked about Moore’s discussion. Making a mistake is only one, limited way of losing one’s footing, even if “mistake” is a preferred term of criticism among philosophers, and Cavell considers it a virtue of Wittgenstein that when he is testing out his interlocutors in *Philosophical Investigations* he does not say that they are making mistakes. “Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy” is a study of how two different modes of contemporary philosophizing, and more specifically how Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, catalogue our current impasses, how philosophy and culture have today lost their tracks. For all the surprising detail of comparison, Cavell is careful not to let the task and momentum of comparison overpower him, and so at a crucial moment separates Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. In Kierkegaard the distance between what is said and what is meant is ironic, but Wittgenstein’s worry is not that our words mean the opposite of what we say: “What he finds, rather, is that someone means something very specific, only different from what he thought he meant, or else means nothing at all just when he thought his meaning was clearest and deepest” (p. 230). The diagnosis required of the forces of emptiness will be very different from that required of the fatedness to irony, but then, as Cavell says, “Wittgenstein’s audience is not the Christian mocked against Christianity” (p. 230).

Cavell writes not primarily to produce new theses or conclusions, nor to produce new arguments to old conclusions, but, as Kierkegaard and the later Wittgenstein did, to excavate and transform the reader’s sensibility, to undo his self-mystifications and redirect his interest. This is a distinctive mode of philosophizing, one which has its own special rigor, in which the accuracy of description bears an enormous weight. In aiming to transform a sensibility, one must capture it precisely, and if one’s descriptions are too coarse, too rough or too smooth, they will hold no direct interest, seeming to have missed the mark completely. Cavell’s writing places extraordinary pressure on itself to describe, undistractedly and specifically, the forces of the mind. This is one reason why one inclines to quotation in discussing his writing. Any paraphrase that even slightly misinflects his descriptions runs the risk of near-total distortion. If one feels that one’s sensibility has been truly captured by a phrase or a conjunction of adjectives, then no substitute will do. Quotation is the appropriate path of entry into the kind of philosopher who lives off his ability to unmask, diagnose, and transform.

Cavell works on one’s sensibility in both a horizontal and a vertical direction. The widening of one’s sensibility appears repeatedly in the essays on film in this book, where Cavell may link, for example, Buster Keaton to Martin Heidegger’s understanding of the “worldhood of the world announcing itself”; it appears, too, in the recurrent theme of Emerson and Thoreau as underwriting ordinary language philosophy, a theme Cavell acknowledges most of his colleagues will find “about as promising as enlivening the passe by the extinct.” Deepening of one’s sensibility is a description of what happens throughout the *Coriolanus* essay; but Cavell’s characteristic deepening occurs when he takes an often-repeated, forever interpreted, almost lifeless phrase or thought and subjects it to a new kind of interpretation that one is unlikely ever to forget. Examples of this are what he says about Wittgenstein’s remark on the fly and the fly-bottle, and his reading of Thoreau’s sentence: “You need only sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you in turns.”

Widening and deepening may occur together, working off one another, as when in “The Thought of Movies,” discussing how one might get an education, Cavell writes: “In my early adolescence lines such as

> Heaven, I’m in heaven
> And the cares that hung around me through the week
> Seem to vanish like a gambler’s lucky streak
> When we’re out together dancing cheek to cheek

a stanza such as this was what I thought of as poetry—nothing else will be poetry for me that cannot compete with the experience of concentration and lift in such words. It seems to me that I knew this then to be an experience not alone of the behavior and intelligence of the words with one another, nor only, in addition, of the wit and beauty of invoking the gambler’s run of luck, but that it was an experience of these (though I would have lacked as yet words of my own in which to say so) together with the drama of using the vanishing of the streak, which is a bad thing, as a simile for the vanishing of cares and access to heaven, which is a good thing—as if beyond bad and good there were a region of chance and risk within which alone the intimacy emblematized or mythologized in the dancing of Astaire and Rogers is realizable.”
(pp. 5-6). This almost prepares one, seventeen pages later, for Cavell's interpretation of Astaire's understanding of his dancing as "declaring that it is meant as a removal not from life but from death. Though the idea of escaping life is a more common view of dance and comedy, and I guess of art in general, than Astaire's idea of redeeming death, it is no less metaphysical. Astaire's view of dancing as facing the music, as a response to the life of inexorable consequences, which turn out to be the consequences of desperate pleasures, would then be a concrete translation of what such a thinker as Nietzsche meant by dancing (as when Zaratustra speaks, urging: 'Raise up your hearts, my brothers, high, higher! And don't forget your legs! Raise up your legs, too, good dancers ...')." Invoking a similar thought of Emerson to close this interpretation, Cavell, sensing the reader's feelings of mounting outrage, concludes: "Can an Astaire-Rogers dance, projected on a screen, be this good? How good would this good have to be?—This is serious business" (p. 23).

The seriousness with which Cavell takes these matters is illustrated again in an exchange with Paul de Man about the latter's by now famous use of Archie Bunker, the main character in the television series *All in the Family*. De Man uses the example of Archie Bunker to set up a joke about Archie-debunking; but he also uses it "to illustrate the tension between grammar and rhetoric," in effect using it to motivate his theory of reading as deconstruction. Cavell shows that if you take this example seriously, and not merely as preparation for a joke, you will find that de Man's ear fails him, that he reads the example inaccurately. And, moreover, the example does not support his thesis about grammar and rhetoric, but rather shows that there is no inevitable relation between grammar and rhetoric. To the charge that he's being ungrateful for de Man's wit, Cavell responds that "for a critic to choose between accuracy and wit is as faitful as for a poet to choose between reason and rhythm," adding—and this could be described as the originating impetus of his thought—that he takes the underlying subject of criticism and of philosophy to be the subject of examples. Surely one thing that has gone wrong with de Man's Archie Bunker example is that he employs it to illustrate an already developed theory of reading as deconstruction, so that the theory imposes a reading of the example. Something similar happens with de Man's careless use of the constantive/performative distinction, when he says that an excuse is a performative utterance because its purpose is not to state but to convince. As Cavell points out, "to say 'I convince you' is not (except by chance) to convince you, and so it is trivially not a performative utterance." What could have made de Man think otherwise? Stanley Fish also has things to say—which Cavell underlines in "The Politics of Interpretation"—about the constantive/performative distinction, but these get Austin's motivations quite wrong; and Fish's opposition between ordinary and literary discourse misaligns Austin's concern with the contrast between the ordinary and the philosophical. These failures on the part of such significant literary theorists cannot be failures of intelligence, as if not being smart enough were the source of the problem. When Cavell says that he takes examples to be the subject matter of criticism and philosophy, this implies that examples are not to be understood as illustrations of *independently given* theories. Cavell does not write as though he knows beforehand how an example must be read, or what a distinction—say, between the ordinary and the literary—comes to. In Cavell's writing the burden of conviction is carried by his laying out of an example or his following out of a distinction, and not by his elaboration of a theory, be it deconstruction or speech-act theory, that always already knows how the world will turn out. De Man's and Fish's failures are lapses of philosophical sensibility, not of intelligence, and failures of sensibility are precisely what Cavell's writing is about.

This issue of sensibility is related to the theoretical appropriateness of philosophy by current literary theory, and the professionalization of a certain kind of philosopher within philosophy itself. When Cavell writes that "the invocations of the name of philosophy in current literary debate are frequently not comprehensible to me as calls upon philosophy" (p. 32), he is referring to the use of, among others, Wittgenstein and, especially, Austin, as so many blanks for so many canons. And it is not just Wittgenstein and Austin who are at issue, but the use of concepts motivated in specific ways by philosophy which then become deformed or incomprehensible or emptied of content when transposed into certain contexts of literary theory. My favorite instance of this problem, as it connects to the relation between example and theory, is Gayatri Spivak's claim, in defending deconstruction against Cavell, that "not to acknowledge that deconstruction distinguishes itself from dialectics precisely by this attention to the syntax that is otherwise ignored in the interest of the semantics of reality is not to speak of deconstruction at all." Many philosophers might just stare blankly at this point, not knowing what to say. Cavell, after recognizing his inability to speak in these ways, pro-
vides a marvelous instance of his capacity to bring things back to earth:

I think it expresses my inabilitys and my prospects here that when I read Spivak's phrase "the semantics of reality" I thought of the following passage from Sense and Sensibility: "Many philosophers, failing to detect any ordinary quality common to real ducks, real cream and real progress, have decided that Reality must be an a priori concept apprehended by reason alone." And her speaking of "syntax that is otherwise ignored" reminded me of Austin's passage a little further on: "Next, 'real' is what we may call a truer-word. It is usually thought... that what one might call the affirmative use of a term is basic... But with 'real' it is the negation that wears the trousers. That is, a definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real, a real such-and-such, only in the light of a specific way in which it might be, or might have been, not real." [P. 58]

A companion issue to the appropriation by literary theory of philosophy is the professionalization of certain philosophers within philosophy. This, too, concerns Austin but especially Wittgenstein and Heidegger, who have all been turned into, no doubt somewhat idiosyncratic, defenders of old-fashioned philosophical theses. Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations is often treated almost as a shell into which every other philosopher can pour his favorite philosophical doctrine, whether it be behaviorism, conventionalism, or antiequalitarianism. And Heidegger is pictured as either a profound or an obscurantist philosopher in whom one might find a defender of holism or existentialism or mysticism, or perhaps the metaphysics of presence. A symptom of these professionalized treatments is the way in which the distinctive writing of Wittgenstein and Heidegger is all but ignored by philosophers, as if what their thought is on the way toward is separate from their forms of expression. Not even this much can be said about Emerson and Thoreau, who, as Cavell describes it, are culturally unpossessed, even repressed by the philosophical profession. It is hard to know which is more discouraging, the turning of Wittgenstein into the professor of philosophy he never wanted to be, or the absence of Emerson and Thoreau as voices in American culture and philosophy. These features of our philosophical scene raise questions about what in philosophy is amenable to professionalization and what resists it. These questions are not merely sociological and historical, but also philosophical, for they force us to wonder what it is about philosophy that allows it to bear such a peculiar relation to professionalization, a relation so different, as

DAVIDSON: BEGINNING CAVEll 239

Cavell observes, from that of both science and poetry. The notion of academic philosophy has the ring neither of academic science nor of academic poetry. It is internal to philosophy to want to know what is called philosophy, a topic so distinctively addressed in Heidegger's What Is Called Thinking?

Given the state of the professionalized world, one might just wonder why Cavell doesn't give up any wish to remain within the profession. But to Richard Rorty's suggestion that if he finds professional philosophy so bankrupt, then he should give up his quarrel with it, Cavell remarks that one of his tasks is to "find philosophy's loss of itself." And this means to him that the professionalization of English-speaking philosophy is not "external, simply foreign, to what philosophy is, or to what philosophy's successor might be." This explains why he so forcefully insists, against certain literary theorists who propose that he replace his dissatisfaction with philosophy by a satisfaction with the newer literary theory, that he cannot recognize as philosophical any expression of his "which simply thinks to escape my profession's paradigms of comprehensibility." It requires delicate and never-ending balance to claim, on the one hand, that the professionalization of philosophy can lead to a "desert of thought" and yet, on the other, to refuse to renounce that profession's paradigms of comprehensibility. Nowhere is this balance more striking than in Cavell's essays on Shakespeare. This book adds an interpretation of Coriolanus to his earlier essays on King Lear and Othello. To the professional literary critic these essays may seem all too speculative, which is to say all too philosophical. To the professional philosopher, they might just seem, horrible dicta, mere literary criticism. But for anyone who cares about the value Shakespeare's words have "when and as they occur," these essays can take one's breath away. Both philosophers and literary critics, in certain moods, are capable of caring about these things. Cavell does write from within philosophy, whether his topic is Shakespeare or film or television or anything else; but he writes from within whatever it is in philosophy that permanently battles against its professionalization. That is why philosophers are both best-placed and worst-placed to understand his work.

A body of thought so concerned with terms of criticism, modes of assessment, and diagnoses of motivation cannot help but open up this perspective on itself. Consider, for example, the criticism one often hears that Cavell's writing is indulgent or self-indulgent. What does it indulge itself in, and what picture of philosophical
writing must one have to view this writing as indulging something? Suppose one were to understand the self-indulgent as the uninhibited. Then that might mean that one was opposing this kind of writing with inhibition, call it repression. And repressed writing might look like rigorous writing, where rigorous ended up associated, by way of rigor mortis, with stiffness. From this viewpoint, Cavell's writing might look like a form of acting-out, which generally has an impulsive character and may be aggressively directed either at oneself or at others. Such acting-out, which is basically repetitive, might accurately describe some current French writing with which Cavell's could be confused. However, one must not forget that Freud contrasted acting-out with remembering: acting-out is a kind of resistance that refuses to recognize one's unconscious wishes and fantasies. Cavell's ambition is precisely to overcome this resistance, to allow one to recall or remember wishes, fantasies, temptations, illusions, urges, desires, and hopes. This explains why Cavell understands reading and writing as redemptive and therapeutic, and why he says that any credible model of such reading and writing will have to be psychoanalytic in character. He ends one essay by writing that "disillusion is what fits us for reality, whether in Plato's terms or D.W. Winnicott's," and goes on to remind us that we therefore require "a true knowledge of what our illusions are." That this knowledge, with its prospects for therapeutic change, is provided by remembering is a lesson from Freud (or Socrates) that Cavell uses to guide his writing.

Suppose, further, that, as my dictionary says, to be indulgent is to yield to one's whims. On an Emersonian understanding of whim, its appearance is just what Cavell wishes for. In his essay on "Self-Reliance" Emerson describes his own writing as follows: "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whom. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation." This is a dangerous business, and no one has better described its dangers than Cavell. Writing about the style of Wittgenstein's Investigations, he has said:

Belief is not enough. Either the suggestion penetrates past assessment and becomes part of the sensibility from which assessment proceeds, or it is philosophically useless. Such writing has its risks: not merely the familiar ones of inconsistency, unclarity, empirical falsehood, unwarranted generalizations, but also of personal confusion, with its attendant dishonesties, and of the tyranny which subjects the world to one's personal problems. The assessment of such failures will exact