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Review of Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010)

New philosophers write autobiographies. Even fewer write them more than once. *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* is Stanley Cavell's second attempt at autobiographical exploration. And that's only if we're being strict with numbers. In many ways, Cavell's entire approach to philosophy has been autobiographical—or at the very least, unusually personal. His work is deeply engaged with the question of what it might mean to live a philosophical life, with “why philosophy, of a certain ambition, tends perpetually to intersect the autobiographical”. For Cavell, questions about philosophy are central to the study of philosophy. “What can I know?” must be intimately connected to “why should I care about what I can know?” This is one of the many reasons why his work has always stood in such stark opposition to that of his colleagues in the Anglo-American philosophical academy. Philosophy, in his terms, is therapeutic. It is bound up (or interchangeable) with literature, psychoanalysis and the care of the self. Philosophy must speak to the everyday: Cavell's recurrent cast list of philosophers—Austin, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Emerson, Thoreau—all “return philosophy to the study of the ordinary”. Cavell has attempted to use their teachings to explore the boundaries of the philosophical. And in this memoir we get a sense of what it means to spend a life struggling to blur those boundaries.

Over his fifty-year career, Cavell has acquired a quasi-mythical reputation—not only among philosophers, but with film critics, literary theorists and political theorists as well. However, his eminence didn't suddenly arise after the publication of one canonical text. Instead it has been won gradually. For Cavell did something that no one else did—and he did it in many publications, spanning many subjects, over many years. He showed why philosophy should care about a huge range of things that, in post-war America, it had ceased to care about. He also

showed why the other arts and humanities disciplines should care about what philosophy had to say. In Cavell's work, philosophy confronts the world, and its past: Hume meets Wittgenstein; J.L. Austin meets King Lear; American philosophers acknowledge their home-grown predecessors; Freud meets Hollywood film. Cavell's importance has not come from a single thesis, but as a result of his amazing ability to expand the horizons of philosophy.

If there is one text, however, that can be seen as the centrepiece of Cavell's work, then it is the brilliant *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (1979). The four sections of the title refer to four sections of the text: the first explores Wittgenstein's philosophy, with particular attention to his concept of criteria. Famously, Wittgenstein shrugged off the teachings of the 'philosophical tradition', escaping the age-old problems of epistemology. He cleared the way for a new approach to philosophy, a philosophy no longer understood as a "set of problems", but (in Cavell's terms) as a "set of texts". Cavell embraces this new philosophy, but he urges us also to take seriously some of the problems that Wittgenstein is thought to have escaped. Specifically (as the title indicates), Cavell wants us to look at the arch-problem of traditional epistemology: the problem of scepticism, the concern of those who doubt the existence of the external world. He argues that we must not give up these older concerns too easily. If we do, we will miss "the truth of skepticism"—"that the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing".

Scepticism about the existence of other minds and the external world demonstrates to us that we cannot know, we cannot be certain of, the future. But we don't believe it. We are obsessed with knowing. This, Cavell says, is a mistake, brought to us by Socrates' belief that *knowing* was the "crown of human activity", and consolidated by epistemology since Descartes and Locke. It is a mistake to think that we can save our lives by knowing them. Instead, Cavell suggests, "what we need is not more knowledge, but the willingness to forgo knowing". There are costs in always trying to know, in "our continuous temptation to

knowledge". These costs include "the loss, or forgoing, of identity or of selfhood". In searching for certainty and answers about the future, we lose our "presentness". We also misunderstand our relationship to the world. Since scepticism tells us that we cannot know the world exists, then the world's "presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing". Rather, "the world is to be accepted", not known. Likewise, other people are not to be "known" but to be "acknowledged".

Cavell thinks that scepticism is caused by "the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle." It is created by the desire to escape the human condition of finitude. Cavell is troubled by this desire. Not only does it create the problem of scepticism, but it also generates the same search for certainty in moral knowledge. That search has entailed the fantasy that morality should be based on absolute rules and principles. But moral philosophy's search for everlasting foundations cannot deliver us from our ordinary human status. It is impossible to gain the moral knowledge that we seek. And so, Cavell argues that we should not seek knowledge, but attempt to overcome knowing. Like Nietzsche, who "undertook to identify the task of overcoming the human with the task of overcoming the denial of the human", Cavell sees the denial of finitude and certainty as the mark of tragedy. "Both skepticism and tragedy conclude with the condition of human separation, with a discovering that I am I." Thus, *The Claim of Reason* ends with Othello and Desdemona, "on their bridal and death sheets. A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to the ocular proof. A human being is not. The two bodies lying together form an emblem of this fact, the truth of skepticism."

The Claim of Reason took over twenty years to produce. Why? Cavell gives some answers in the introduction to the book itself, which offers a narrative to the four sections of the text. Many who read Cavell's memoir will be hoping that he provides more answers here. But Cavell isn't one for direct answers. The first two hundred and fifty pages deal almost exclusively with his life before his encounter with academic philosophy. Readers need not be impatient, however: Cavell is at his

best when describing his early boyhood and adolescence growing up between Atlanta, Georgia and Sacramento, California.

Cavell was born to a Jewish family in 1926. His mother was a professional pianist (who, we are told on three separate occasions, earned “a man’s salary”) and his father an Eastern European immigrant shopkeeper-cum-pawnbroker. Like many little boys, or certainly like many from the pages of Philip Roth, the young Cavell feared that his father hated him. His father’s “attacks”—excruciatingly bad indigestion—appear to be caused by his presence: the son seems bound, eventually, to kill him. It is tempting to see the whole memoir as a story of a son caught between his mother’s love and his father’s hate: the more enjoyable parts of his youth are spent exploring the backstage world of performance theatre with his mother; the least pleasant, as a long-suffering unpaid employee in his father’s pawnshop. But it’s not quite that simple. Cavell also wants to show how he overcame the disappointments of youth—how he made the most of his lot. Stuck in the pawnshop, he learns from his father the “economic dimensions of human existence”, the rules of exchange and counting. He notes the similarities between commerce and philosophy, the shared language of “interest, inheriting, borrowing, owing, terms, conditions, account, utility, obligation, responsibility, etc”. He tries to show how the child became the adult. The result is that it sometimes seems that, for Cavell, becoming a philosopher was overdetermined: these early experiences of theatre and “the poetry of pawnbroking”, alongside so many other accidents of childhood, helped prepare him for his philosophical education.

In part, this sense of overdetermination is created by the structure of the book. The memoir begins in July 2003 with the statement, “The catheterization of my heart will no longer be postponed”. Cavell sets up at least two different narratives, of present and past—a “double time scheme” from which to explore what Freud called “the detours on the human path to death”. Though written as diary entries in the present, many entries ignore the present entirely. Instead they simulate the looping patterns of memory. We leap backwards from his

current state—the development of illness and old age—to childhood. We jump to adolescence, then back to childhood again. Occasionally it's almost like a rendering of Freudian free association, but the contemporary calendar isn't as important as the deeper associations and looping between different parts of the past. At times, we hear the narrator Cavell's current preoccupations: what he thinks about George W. Bush, or what he is currently reading (in the last sections he gives an interpretation of Maurice Blanchot). Even when the focus is the past, we are never entirely locked in. Alongside the memories themselves are many meditations on the art of remembering, of retelling stories. This is Cavell at his most philosophical, so it is compelling stuff. But though compelling philosophically, it is sometimes less compelling as a story of a life. In some ways, this is precisely what Cavell is getting at. The major events of life are not what shape us. It is the uneventful, the unnoted, the unexciting, which shapes our lives. Telling good stories about the everyday and the ephemeral is, however, a difficult task. Though Cavell tries, the process of remembering sometimes swamps the memories themselves. Meanwhile, he insists that it is usually impossible to draw morals from one's life, but simultaneously wants to show how each event, or non-event, primes him for his future philosophical calling. It is at once too messy and too neat.

Still, some of the memories make for a gripping read, especially those of his youth. Cavell makes much of his childhood accidents. Alongside the usual scrapes—the falling out of swings, crashing of bicycles—stands an especially important incident: aged six, Cavell is playing with a ball in the street outside his house in Atlanta when he is hit by a car. His left ear is badly damaged. The importance of this becomes clear with the later onset of the Second World War: the adolescent Cavell is deemed unfit to serve in the US Navy. His injured ear inadvertently enables his academic career.

Despite its future implications, the damaged ear is but one of many youthful physical ailments Cavell describes. (It is not lost on the reader that this obsession with the physicality of youth is that of an old man, crafting his memoirs as he moves in and out of hospital.) One more

surprising example is his early discomfort with clothes. On acquiring a pair of jeans for the first time, Cavell writes:

It seems to me that I remember hardly being able to walk in them. I wondered how other boys' jeans ever got to be old, worn with wear, hence to conform to their bodies, that is, to move with instead of against their motion. In fact I never have learned to wear them. After some weeks of painful chafing it turned out that yellow corduroy trousers were an acceptable substitute... the relation of sensing my clothes to be wrong went with, as both cause and effect, sensing my body to be wrong—not as if it were not mine, but as if I were wrong for it. Would it help to say, not of the wrong gender but of the wrong species?

And: "I don't know when I first formed the idea that clothes were simply manufactured for sizes and proportions different from mine, call them normal... What did people do?"

These discomforts are symptomatic of Cavell's childhood loneliness. Throughout the book Cavell wants to emphasize the untimeliness of his own life. He is always slightly out of step. During first grade he skips two school years, thus forced into childhood, and then adolescent, isolation. He confesses his "helpless loneliness" to his mother, and asks why the other kids don't like him: "Is it because I am younger than they are... or is it because I am Jewish?" Though his mother answers that it is his youth that prevents him making friends, Cavell fears that the right answer is a mixture of both. He is sentenced to exile by being unable to go to a "special school" in the North. "The moral was that I did not belong where I was and that while there was a place I did belong I could not get there."

This feeling of being out of sync and in-between generations reoccurs. Unable to take part in the main struggle of his age, the Second World War, he is confused about how to relate to the struggle of the next generation in the sixties. He is one of a group of students and academics who, in the 'Freedom Summer' of 1964, travel from the North to

Mississippi to participate in voter registration and in various forms of teaching, as part of Civil Rights campaigns. During the Harvard Strike of 1969, when students occupied the University Hall, Cavell and John Rawls help “translate” the demands of student protestors into academician speak so they can present them to the Philosophy Faculty. But Cavell’s unease with his own generation is not just political: forced by a group of young graduate students to lead a seminar on Heidegger (his Harvard colleagues reject ‘continental philosophy’ outright), he sees himself as being shamed into doing something he was secretly looking for the right to do: “it is a way the young authorize the freedom of the old”. During these years, Cavell begins to recognise that his intellectual adventure would take place “primarily in the company of those younger than the members of my own generation.” It is the undergraduate and future film director Terrence Malick who first encourages him in 1964 to think seriously about Heidegger. Around the same time, he meets his second wife, Cathleen, also a generation younger than him. The young undergraduate journalist catches the attention of the not-so-young academic—they begin their relationship the night of the Northeast blackout of 1965. For Cavell, these events all appear as more evidence that he has never quite belonged to his own generation.

There are various ways of getting around this not-quite-belonging. They appear in Cavell’s memoirs as forms of rescue, or therapy—the constant need to “begin again”. The first, chronologically, is music. It is his musical ability, particularly with the alto saxophone, that gets him his place as the leader of his high school band, thus overcoming his youth (and Jewishness). “I was a made man. No student had ever been the leader of the band. The social, or say, secondary, gains were incalculable.” The band even solves his fear of clothes: all members wear matching jackets—through the neutrality of the uniform “the immediate issue of the propriety of clothes was put to rest”. He nearly becomes a professional musician touring Chicago, and ends up studying music at Berkeley. Still, coming as he did from a musical family (above all, a musical mother) this was not a permanent sort of rescue. To escape his childhood, to begin again, he ditches music. More curiously, before going to Berkeley, he also changes his name—from

Goldstein to Cavell. But he doesn't dwell on this episode and, strikingly for one so adept at recalling and re-evaluating memories, he doesn't revisit it later in the book either. So we don't really get to know much about this name-change. Instead, we hear about what becoming "Cavell"—"the experience of reentering the world unknown to the world"—allowed.

Unlike many of his contemporary philosophers, Cavell doesn't really discover philosophy until his mid-twenties. When he does, his first love is Freud. Since psychoanalysis, for Cavell, is a kind of philosophy (and philosophy a kind of therapy)—and, even more crucially, since childhood is not a pre-philosophical time, but a highly intellectual one—it is difficult for him to specify at what point the possibility of a philosophical life became realistic. The door to philosophy is most fully opened to him through the friends he makes at Berkeley and Harvard. The philosophers' cast list here includes Thomas Kuhn, Morton White and Bernard Williams. In conversation with these—conversations that Cavell replays as neat aphoristic dialogues—he begins to develop his idea of what philosophy ought to be. Recalling his first conversation with Kuhn that stretched into the early hours of morning:

Tom was becoming agitated in a way I had not seen. He suddenly lurched forward in his chair with a somewhat tortured look I had begun to be familiar with. "I know Wittgenstein uses the idea of 'paradigm'. But I do not see its implications in his work. How do I answer the objection that this destroys the truth of science? I deplore the idea. Yet if instruction and agreement are the essence of the matter then Hitler could instruct me that a theory is true and get me to agree." My reply I cast as follows, using the words I remember using then. "No he could not. He could not *educate* you in, *convince* you of, *show you*, its truth. Hitler could declare a theory true as an edict. He could effectively threaten to kill you if you refuse to, or fail to, believe it. But all that means is that he is going to kill you: or perhaps kill you if you do not convince him, show him, that you accept and will follow the edict. I don't say that this is clear. But it is

something I cannot doubt is worth doing whatever work it will take to make clear.” Tom’s response was startling. He rose from his chair, began pacing in front of the fireplace, saying something like ‘Yah. Yah’. What causes conviction? What, perhaps, rather, may undo an unnoticed conviction?

Philosophical friendship is important to Cavell. And we learn that he has been a very important philosophical friend to many very important philosophers.

A major event in Cavell’s early philosophical journey is the discovery of ordinary language philosopher J.L. Austin. He attends the lecture series on the theory of the performative utterance that Austin delivers at Harvard in 1955, published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words*:

In reaching the crisis of giving up my search for a relation to music that mattered to me in the way I would come to imagine a life of the mind could matter to me, I discovered that I had never, as I might say, chosen my life, or suffered its choosing me, but accepted the tow of a certain talent. The crisis precipitated by Austin’s appearance on the scene, in contrast, left me with a set of fragments that seemed to have some obscure but essential relation to the expression of my desire for a world. In the former case (the silencing of meaning in music) I felt I had misplaced the world; in the latter case (the philosophical questioning of meaning in everyday speech) I felt disoriented with the discovery of a further world.

In 1963, Cavell accepts a tenured position at Harvard. He is particularly good at re-creating the stifling, bleak academic culture of Anglo-American philosophy that he enters there. His struggle to carve a place for himself alongside the mainstream of analytic philosophy is a slow one. How to convince a bunch of unsympathetic logicians that Austin

or late Wittgenstein (let alone Heidegger, Emerson, Wallace Stevens or Hollywood film) are serious philosophy? Cavell doesn't offer many tips.

But it's not just philosophy that Cavell wants his memories to bring to life. Crucially, it's also writing. The questions associated with writing are, in many ways, the central themes of the book: how to start writing, how to keep writing, how to read writing, who to write for, who has the right to write. Describing his friendship with the "virtuosic" Bernard Williams, which began at Princeton in 1963, Cavell writes that

I allowed myself to say to Bernard that I thought his writing did not do justice to his thoughts and interests as I was coming to know them. I may actually have said that I thought he was better than he wrote. A risky plunge, but I had invested in our friendship and evidently needed to test it. His response was to reply, as it were standing apart for a moment from his brilliance and charm, that he recognized this and did not accept it as final. Something I did not risk saying to him, then or ever, was that I also thought one must perpetually write better than one is.

Writing better than one is, or learning how to write at all, preoccupies Cavell. He says that from his first essay, the famous 'Must we mean what we say?', his "writing expresses restiveness with philosophical professionalism." Because of this restiveness, because he wanted his writing to express everything he felt, he found it difficult to produce all that much of it. Here, we get to hear the story of how Cavell finally finished *The Claim of Reason*—the book of his PhD thesis that took 18 years to publish. Prompted by his experience of writer's block, he begins psychoanalysis for the second time. Like the first time (during the break-up of his first marriage), he considers leaving academia and entering the psychoanalytic profession. "This writing had become a pawn in a hidden game I was playing with my life." Unable to continue, Cavell had "packed away the manuscript and its associated notes in closed boxes". His therapist gently suggests that his response is a phobic one, and may not be analysable. He recommends unpacking

the manuscript, “placing it on his desk as he would do as if he were continuing”. Cavell writes

The following week I began by reporting the results, which went as follows. “I did as you suggested but nothing happened.”—“You must have felt something.”—“Really nothing. Well—except—I guess for a mild—pervasive—sense—of pleasure.” And after a stunned silence, we broke into the grandest of the laughs we had had together... Is it tragic or is it comic that one may forbid oneself a deep source of pleasure simply because it is a source of (unrecognized) pleasure?

It’s not just the difficulties in the production of his writing that occupy Cavell, but the consumption of it, too. He claims that few have understood “the writing I am led or bound to produce. The public response for some twenty years after the appearance of [my] first book was, to my knowledge, with fond exceptions, either silence or dismay...” It is true that Cavell is notoriously difficult to read. But, he asks, “what choice does one have over the way one writes?” As someone that has spent much of his life considering the “audience” of philosophy, and attempting to theorize the “ordinary”, this surely poses a problem he needs to take seriously.

He does so, of course, philosophically. Many concerns about writing are bound up with those about speaking—concerns on which Cavell has built his philosophical career. How to speak? What does it mean to speak? What does the right to speak for oneself consist in? What is the ground for that right? “The matter of ‘speaking for’ is never an epistemological certainty but something like a moral claim... which others may grant or question or refuse.” As with speaking, so also with writing: Cavell does indeed take certain refusals of his writing as instances of moral refusal. Passages where he recalls the reception of his work by the Anglo-American philosophical community naturally have an air of defensiveness about them. Cavell tries to explain why he is so difficult to understand; he acknowledges “a sort of horror of stating the obvious”. The everyday, for Cavell, is itself esoteric. He also

admits other failings: “I have perhaps made the mistake of trusting my prose to intensify the intimacy in approaching a single reader sufficiently to form some rough equivalent of the magnification of attention possible in a large and crowded classroom.” Too often, however, Cavell protests too much. He recounts an anecdote of a student who denies that there is any repetition in his work, seeing constant innovation where others see mere repetition. The implication is strong: only those who truly understand my work will be able to see that I do not repeat myself.

Is this fair? It certainly brings the question of the audience of philosophy back to the fore. Who is the audience that will recognise that Cavell’s work is never repetitious? They are few, as he seems painfully to have learnt. At times this book feels like a final justification for just how difficult he is to read. This difficulty is compounded by its complex narrative structure. The memoir is written as if it were a stream of consciousness, and when edited by Cavell, many corrections are indicated to us by his editorial voice. For example, we hear in parentheses that the girlfriend of his grandson, introduced a sentence earlier, is now his grandson’s wife. Elsewhere, Cavell is so concerned to capture the experience of recall that what seems like careless repetition of phrases is often left intact (I take these as his editorial decision: with Cavell, it is safe to assume more awareness, not less). Hence we grow familiar with his mother’s earning of “a man’s wage”. His father, we learn repeatedly, was a “serious man” who respected “serious men”. And so Cavell recreates for us the thickly layered processes of remembering, engendering its own mnemonic myths along the way. Whilst the effect is beautifully to recreate these processes, this does not always help Cavell’s readers make sense of his life. His philosophical and linguistic complexity is made ever more complex by the instability of his narrative. This is probably Cavell’s point: our lives are infinitely complex and unstable. Whatever else readers might miss, they certainly grasp this.

Sometimes it feels like the problems that have faced Cavell’s reviewers—the problem of how to write about Cavell without simply quoting

his own words; the problem of how to select and summarize—are those that, ultimately, faced Cavell himself in reviewing his own life. With all this writing about writing, this speaking about expressing, does the story of his life get lost? Some of his adult life may, but this is perhaps equally due to his unwillingness to reveal much about the lives of those close to him. At the very least, the story of death does not. The descriptions of the deaths of his parents are very moving. His mother, in the last weeks of her life installed in a nursing home, tries to play the piano and realises she is no longer able:

the sounds she made on the instrument were mostly incomprehensible. I could make out in those fifteen or twenty terrible seconds certain distorted shapes of the Schulz-Evler 'Blue Danube', now a destroyed spider's web. She recoiled from her attempt, uncomprehendingly, before I reached to guide her back out.

The book closes with Cavell's father in hospital, two years before his death, having a pacemaker placed. Annoyed by all the fuss, his father insists that it is unnecessary.

It's enough. It's natural. What is the emergency? If a child is seriously ill, it is an emergency. To run in and out of the room because an eighty-three-year-old man may die is not an emergency. It is ugly to behave in this way.

The father asks his son to tell the nurses and doctors to stop fussing. The son finds himself in a dilemma. Who has the right to speak for his father? Who has the right to end his life? As ever, Cavell avoids a definitive conclusion. He goes to find his mother. The book ends. It is fitting that, with these stories of death, Cavell is able to stop writing. It is also fitting that in stopping writing, he does not offer a conclusion. Writing, like philosophy, and like life, does not provide answers. Like all his works, these memoirs are intended to have a therapeutic effect—for the writer as well as the reader. In the end, it is not the talking cure to which Cavell finally turns. It is the writing cure.

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