Cavell, Stanley (b.1926)

American philosopher of skepticism, language, literature, and film at Harvard University. Cavell's contributions to aesthetics move in two directions: (1) toward his own guiding project of diagnosing and undermining skepticism, which he characterizes as an issue not only for philosophy but also for poetry, drama, and film; and (2) toward issues and problems within specific fields of criticism and within works of art or literature. These directions in turn contain prospects for a unity that helps to structure—though it cannot eliminate—the inveterate plurality of Cavell's investigations. Ultimately, this unity derives from the possibility that the various versions of skepticism are, in fact, various guises of a single, self-inflicted threat to human existence. He characterizes the threat of skepticism as the most recent and perhaps the most destructive version of the ancient wish to escape the human being's situation within language and history. What philosophy knows as Cartesian or Humean skepticism is only the most intellectually refined expression of this skeptical wish.

Cavell's most detailed effort to undermine epistemological skepticism takes the form of a reading of Wittgenstein (Cavell 1979). As in Wittgenstein, the terms of Cavell's investigations bear obvious affinities to some of the crucial enterprises and concepts of aesthetics. He modifies the enormous importance that Wittgenstein attaches to the possibilities and necessities of human judgment, including features of what other philosophers take to be its mere contingencies: for instance, its agreements, its evaluations, its publicness, and its persistent privacies. Cavell goes on to characterize the philosophical power of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as resting on written recollections and achievements of the human voice in its most ordinary settings. He thus isolates a dimension of Wittgenstein—and perhaps of philosophizing as such—that is potentially of special interest to students of aesthetics.

Cavell characterizes skepticism as embodying a wish to repudiate the “givenness” of language and the apparent arbitrariness in the fact that human beings must express themselves in order to be understood. Accordingly, he characterizes as skeptical the precarious efforts to reconstruct human language and communication on a more “rational” or more “justified” foundation, one which would avoid the need for the less tidy and more disruptive aspects of ordinary speech. The overcoming of skepticism will occur not as a single theoretical event but as the repeated, practical efforts to recover human expressiveness from its suppression in philosophical and antiphilosophical theorizing. Some philosophers have found Cavell's responses to skepticism to constitute a merely literary solution to an intellectual problem. Students of aesthetics might follow Cavell and Wittgenstein in exploring a less reductive sense of human expression and hence a more interesting access to the literary conditions of philosophical questioning.

Cavell persistently tracks something like an aesthetic dimension of judgment and expression throughout the fields of epistemology, morality, and the philosophy of language. It is therefore not surprising that his work leaves little room for the idea of a set of intrinsically aesthetic problems, which might be treated in isolation from the rest of philosophy. Furthermore, it is of the essence of his approach to aesthetic questions that his work attempts to take on the issues of the critics that matter the most to him. Cavell's primary concern is to address the insights and mystifications of those critics,
readers, and viewers (himself included) who have already felt the pull of the particular work or experience in question. His investigations often move directly from the individual work (for instance, of Shakespeare or of film) to the issues of philosophy. Those who have felt the power and the exactness of his readings are unlikely to see the pertinence of the more generalized issues of academic aesthetics. Nevertheless, it is possible to specify some lines of investigation in Cavell's work that either belong explicitly to aesthetics or else can be seen to bear on the wider issues of literature and interpretation that increasingly occupy the attention of philosophers concerned with the arts. These aesthetic investigations can be divided into six major segments.

1. The essays collected as his first book (1976a) include his most explicit treatments of specific aesthetic questions about intentions, pleasure, metaphor, musical form and “significance,” literary or dramatic genres and artistic media, and the relationship of aesthetics to criticism. This first book also includes extended instances of his critical activities (climactically, his essays on Samuel Beckett and King Lear), as well as a sort of Wittgensteinian proposal for the centrality of aesthetics within a newly selfcritical practice of philosophy.

2. Cavell's investigations of Shakespeare (2002) have secured him a place as one of the leading literary critics of his generation. He continues to delineate his sense of the isomorphism between the convulsions of philosophy inaugurated in Descartes's methods of representative self-doubt and Shakespeare's preoccupation with the catastrophes in human knowing and with the traumatic constructions of the modern world. Perhaps because of their resistance to regarding a work of literature as harboring anything like the propensity for rigorous thought, Anglo-American philosophers have found this side of Cavell's project to be essentially inaudible.

3. His work on film begins with an exploration of the relations between the photographic basis of the movies and their specific incarnation of narrative possibilities (1976b, 1981). He comes to focus on the possibilities contained primarily within two genres: “the comedy of remarriage” and “the melodrama of the unknown woman” (1996).

4. His work on the relation of literary Romanticism to the critique and transformation of Kant begins with a book on Thoreau (1992) and becomes a central theme of his Beckman lectures (reprinted in 1988a). The issue of Kant's inheritance is at the center of his continuing encounters with Emerson. His stress on an Emersonian, antimetaphysical strand of moral perfectionism – stretching from certain regions of Kant to Wittgenstein and Heidegger – leads him to his most prolonged, recent confrontation (1990) with American philosophy, as represented by John Rawls and Saul Kripke.

5. Again beginning with Thoreau, Cavell has steadily intensified his excavation of a problematic of reading, with a consequent emphasis on the fact of writing as a source and emblem of human activity and originality (1979, 1988a, 1990).

6. Finally, there is an increasingly explicit involvement with psychoanalysis that needs to be distinguished from other contemporary approaches. Cavell treats Freud's work neither as a perfected methodology of interpretation nor as the enlargement of our narrative capacity for self-dramatization. In Cavell's account, the goal of a psychoanalytic reading is, above all, a better understanding of our prior seduction or bewitchment by the work, an understanding which frees us for a still more unsheltered engagement with the work's significance and fascination.

Cavell's use of psychoanalysis to create the freedom for a further encounter with the work can thus
stand as an expression of one of his earliest motives for thinking about the arts. Already in his concern with the inescapability of intentions in our experience of art and in his related struggles against false pictures of the “inside” and “outside” of the work, Cavell has sought to block the idea that the significance of art can be appreciated from some safely externalized distance. Here, as elsewhere, he sees philosophy as crystallizing the human inclination to imagine ourselves exempt from the seductions of experience on the grounds that we are capable of analyzing it. But philosophy is also a name for the place in which we might learn that there is no separate place from which to learn the significance of human works and expressions, apart from submitting to the specific demands they make on our capacities for understanding and response.

In Cavell's account, the task of aesthetics is to maintain the still more basic and ineradicable demand that we submit ourselves to the experiences that we are drawn to learn from. (This version of Kant demands that we submit the object to our own eyes, for our own judgment.) But this thought goes together with his insistence that we bear in mind those ordinary surfaces of words and concepts and events, without which the struggle with the depths of our experience of a work is bound to lose its sense.

See also criticism; morality and art; psychoanalysis and art; wittgenstein.

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