

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 1, 2020,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Stanley Louis  
Cavell was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## STANLEY LOUIS CAVELL

BORN: September 1, 1926

DIED: June 19, 2018

Stanley Louis Cavell, Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value, *Emeritus*, died on June 19, 2018, at the age of 91. Over the span of his long career as teacher and writer, he made contributions to a remarkable range of subjects and enlarged the possibilities for philosophical work in the English-speaking world. Much of his writing concerns the philosophical confrontation with skepticism, both in the mind's relation to the external world and to the existence of other subjectivities. These are typically conceived of as epistemological problems in academic philosophy. One of the major themes of his masterwork *The Claim of Reason* (1979) is revealing the limitations of the epistemological perspective and showing that the source of both forms of skepticisms, and their intractability, lay in "the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle." This thought emerges from a deep engagement with the philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the "ordinary language philosophy" of J. L. Austin and is, among other things, a profound act of reading these philosophers. This book is unclassifiable, astonishing in its range and ambition, both in its depth of thought and in the new possibilities Cavell discovers for philosophical writing.

Cavell's deep interest in the various forms of writing we call philosophical led him to explore the boundaries between philosophical texts and texts by authors such as Shakespeare, Beckett, Thoreau, and Emerson. His early essay on *King Lear* is groundbreaking philosophical criticism and his lifetime of writing on Shakespeare has had an important impact on the vast field of Shakespeare criticism.

From his childhood years in Atlanta and Sacramento, he had been a lover of movies, both Hollywood and, once available, "art" cinema. In 1971 he published *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, the first serious book about film by an anglophone philosopher, long before there was anything like film studies in universities. It is a brilliant book, challenging a received understanding of the relations of popular culture and high culture, treating certain Hollywood comedies of the thirties with the same philosophical seriousness as the films of Bergman or Antonioni or the drama of Shakespeare. The academic

philosophical world has changed since the 1970s, in part through Cavell's efforts and example, so it can be hard to appreciate the newness and daring of such work at the time. From the beginning, he sought to write philosophy that was both scholarly and accessible, drawing upon "continental" figures like Kierkegaard and Heidegger as well as the "analytic" figures of his training at Harvard. He continued to write about film for the rest of his life, publishing three more books on the subject and inspiring a generation of film scholars and filmmakers.

Cavell's philosophical writing is always alive to the question of what occasions philosophical questioning in our lives, taking the question of the nature of philosophical reflection as a natural topic for philosophy itself. This is related to his insistence on the autobiographical or first-personal element in philosophy, from Augustine, Descartes, Montaigne, and Rousseau to twentieth-century figures like Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is appropriate, therefore, that the final of his eighteen books is his remarkable autobiographical reflections, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (2010), which recounts his early life in vivid detail through the first phase of his career as a philosopher. It is by turns intimate, reflective, grateful, and searing. There is nothing like it in the world of philosophical autobiography.

Cavell's mother was a musician, and he grew up playing piano and clarinet. He originally majored in music at the University of California, Berkeley, after playing with jazz bands in the Sacramento area. After Berkeley he entered the Juilliard School of Music to study composition. Moving away from a career in music, he moved to Los Angeles, where he took courses in philosophy at UCLA, before transferring to the Harvard Ph.D. program in 1951. He was named a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows in 1953. His first teaching job was at Berkeley, where he taught for six years. He returned to Harvard, joining the Philosophy Department in 1963, where he remained until his retirement in 1997.

Shortly after his return to Harvard he joined a group of graduate students who taught at Tougaloo College, a historically black college in Mississippi, as part of what became known as Freedom Summer. Later, during the campus unrest in spring 1969, Cavell and his colleague John Rawls worked with a group of African American students to draft language for a faculty vote to establish what became Harvard's Department of African and African-American Studies. In 1979 he worked with the documentary filmmaker Robert Gardner to conceive and found the Harvard Film Archive.

He was a beloved and charismatic teacher of graduate and undergraduate students. Even students who only took a single course with him would write to him later to tell him what a difference it had made to their lives. Many students became lifelong friends, inside and outside of academic life.

Over his long career he was the recipient of many honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship in 1992, the Centennial Medal from Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in 2000, and the Romanell-Phi Beta Kappa Professorship in Philosophy in 2004. He was President of

the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association (1996–97). He gave the plenary address at the Shakespeare World Congress in 1996. He was the recipient of a number of honorary degrees, including from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon. After his retirement, he taught at Yale University and the University of Chicago.

He and Cathleen (Cohen) Cavell were married in 1967. He is survived by her and by their two sons, Ben and David; his daughter, Rachel, from his first marriage; and several grandchildren.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas Michael Scanlon, Jr.

Marc Shell

Richard Moran, Chair