

The Triumph of the Gift over the Curse in Stanley Cavell's *Little Did I Know*



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The remarks below were first delivered on the occasion of an event at Harvard University, on October 14th, 2010, celebrating the publication of Stanley Cavell's autobiographical work, Little Did I Know. Each of the invited speakers was given the following instructions by the organizers of the event: (1) to select a handful of passages from Little Did I Know (perhaps pairing them with related passages from Cavell's earlier work), (2) to make the handful of selected passages available in advance for distribution to the audience of the event, and (3) to confine their remarks on the occasion of the event itself to a meditation on the significance of the selected passages. This text is the result of my attempt to follow these instructions as faithfully as possible.

I will speak about four passages from Cavell's work. (I will refer to my four passages as Quotations #1, #2, #3 and #4 respectively.) The first three of these passages are drawn from Stanley Cavell's last major piece of writing, *Little Did I Know*—a work which most philosophers of my acquaintance will not hesitate to classify as at best only secondarily a work of philosophy just because it is in the first place so evidently a work of autobiography. The fourth of my passages is drawn from one of Cavell's earliest major pieces of writing, his monograph-length essay *The Avoidance of Love*—a work which, despite its apparent assumption of the outward form of the philosophical essay, most philosophers of my acquaintance will hesitate to regard as that, not only because of its endless preoccupation with minute questions pertaining to the

interpretation of a Shakespeare play, *King Lear*, but more urgently because of its tendency occasionally (as a number of contemporaneous reviewers saw the matter) to lapse into reflections on the supposed pertinence of these questions to further matters of an evidently autobiographical nature.¹

In the early work, *The Avoidance of Love*, it is, in the eyes of these professional philosophical acquaintances of mine, the element of the autobiographical which, it is felt, intrudes itself. In the case of this work, the intrusion is into a form of writing which, if better disciplined (at least according to the dictates of such a sensibility), ought to remain firmly within the plane of the properly philosophical. In the last major work, *Little Did I Know*, it is rather the note of the philosophical which is now felt to be the intrusive element—the element which is now felt to jar and grate. In this case, the intrusion enters from the opposite direction, as it were: with the note of the inappropriately ambitiously philosophical appearing to intrude itself into a form of writing, which, if better disciplined (on this same view of what discipline requires), ought to stick to the apparent business at hand, or at least what starts out appearing to be the business at hand, namely that of supplying the reader with a properly autobiographical account of the author's life and times (beginning with where he was born, moving on to where he grew up, how he was formed by his circumstances, etc.). In the case of both of these works, there is a sense of transgression experienced by these readers of my acquaintance. There is therefore a certain parallel in the reception of this most recent work to that of Cavell's earlier work among such readers: The outbreak of these allegedly inappropriate "interludes" within these texts are chalked up to the author's failures of self-discipline, or, as it is sometimes put, his tendency to self-indulgence.

It ought to be difficult, however, for a less reactive, and hence more charitable, reader to avoid the conclusion that it is just these reactions, among others, which our author self-consciously seeks to elicit—indeed, that, in seeking to reshape his reader's sensibility in the ways in which he does, it is, among other things, the very ground of such reactions which the author seeks to expose and draw into question. For an analytic philosopher to allow himself to encounter Cavell's work in this spirit of charity, however, requires that he first be able to achieve some degree of independence from forms of reaction which have been deeply instilled in his soul throughout the

¹See, e.g. Warner.

entire course of his professional formation—not an easy thing to do. To echo a remark from the Foreword to Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*: I here speak of professional lives, frightening matters. For no one knew better than Cavell himself that if one aspires to write in ways that resist professionalization then one must also reckon with forms of professional rejection and disdain.

Though their relative proportions are oppositely balanced in the two aforementioned sorts of writing, in the very early text on *Lear* and in the very late so-called autobiography, there is felt to be a similar sort of unholy mixture of the autobiographical with the philosophical in these two works—a mixture not easily tolerated in any proportion beyond the minimal by the professional superego of the contemporary analytic philosopher. Any sympathetic effort on the part of a commentator to address the intellectual ambition of such writing of Cavell's must therefore resign itself to committing further crimes against such canons of professional taste, further ruffling the sensitivities of sensibilities shaped by such strictures on the disciplinarily permissible; or at least any such effort must do so the moment it permits itself seriously to explore that dimension of Cavell's thought in which the philosophical and the autobiographical come to find themselves thus inextricably intertwined. Poor creature of my own intellectual milieu that I am, it is thus not without a certain trepidation that I now venture forth into this territory, consigning myself to these various forms of disapproval by refusing to share in them.

With the help of my four selected passages, I would like to speak about three matters which, it seems to me, must claim the attention of any attentive reader of *Little Did I Know*—they are: first, (what I will call) the Gift of the Father; second, (what I will call) the Curse of the Father; and, finally, (what I will call) the Triumph of the Gift over the Curse.

Cavell, or rather Stanley, as I came to know him, and as he is known to the central protagonists of *Little Did I Know*, was (as he was for many of my co-symposiasts on the occasion of these remarks) what the Germans call one's *Doktorvater*—a word which succinctly registers the ways in which the responsibilities and concerns of a dissertation supervisor can gradually shade off into those of a parent. The word also indirectly records the ways in which the obligations and anxieties of a *Doktorsohn* can correlatively come to bleed into those of a son.

I have been given the remarkable assignment of choosing some excerpts from the book in which Cavell tells the story of his life as part of an exercise in which I am then to tell something about those

moments in the compass of a few more moments. As I understand the instruction, I am being asked not only to select for this occasion some of what Cavell says in the telling of the tale of his life, but also to select just those moments which are appropriate to this occasion—on which this doctoral son speaks of his doctoral father, as we gather here to celebrate both that life and this book about it. The exercise feels to me as if it had been designed to lead me to choose Quotation #1 as my opening excerpt. That passage is about Stanley's father's ability to tell a Yiddish story:

Quotation #1:

[M]y father was well known in his circles for the stories he told in Yiddish, the most impressive of which were as long as short stories and whose punch lines were less important than the telling of the stories, making epics of events of unnoticeably everyday characters. . . . I loved the stories for the attention they held, for the mounting pleasure they constructed, for the burst of excellent feeling they released, all depending upon the talent displayed in the telling. It was, as I learned, the strict decorum of telling Yiddish stories that they had to be appropriate to an occasion (at least an initial story had to be; others could follow their lead if they at least equaled, in some direction, that appropriateness). (*Little* 124–5)

In being given my assignment for today's occasion, I am, in effect, being asked to display my ability to do what my doctoral father's father is described in Quotation #1 as being able to do so well: to be able to select the story most appropriate to the occasion. The talent here at issue is not that more familiar form of genius which lies in being the originator of a story. Rather it is that less celebrated but no less sublime form of genius which consists in taking a story that already lies ready-made for the telling and *recounting* it, making it count *anew*, by telling it in just the right way at just the right time.

When I speak of the Gift of the Father, I mean that which the father bequeaths to the son, which proves decisively enabling for the son's path through life. For who can surpass my doctoral father's father's son in the ability to tell a story and to produce it at just the right moment, as if that story had been waiting for just this crossroads in a human life to come along? Stanley recounts in these pages and elsewhere how John Austin's ability to tell stories (for example, about donkeys shot by mistake or by accident) opened up for him a new vision of how to practice philosophy—a form of philosophy at which the young Stanley Cavell proved to be a master. The key to the art lies in the practitioner's ability to produce at just the right moment that unique story or example able to release our philosophical thought

from its self-inflicted captivity. This is the talent of John Austin's which Cavell reports himself as so admiring upon his first encounter with it, but we now learn in this book it is also one which he was able to recognize upon his first encounter with it as a version of a talent which his father had possessed to such a remarkable degree and thus one which the young Stanley suspected himself of being able, following upon Austin's example, also to be able to bring to bear upon matters philosophical. Thus a certain discernable intersection in the talents of an original father figure and a subsequent one helped to form a fateful crossroads in the formation of our philosopher/autobiographer.

In Austin these stories have a particular cast: Each one is, in its own way, a little morality play—one in which the moral always pertains to a certain instance of carelessness on the part of philosophers in their relation to language. Austin will ask questions such as: What is the difference between doing something by mistake and doing something by accident? And he will point out how certain philosophers seem to be implicitly committed to the idea that there does not seem to be much of a difference here. Then Austin will tell a story, or in this case, more precisely, his pair of stories:

You have a donkey, and so have I, and they graze in the same field. The day comes when I conceive a dislike for mine. I go to shoot it, draw a bead on it, fire: the brute falls in its tracks. I inspect the victim, and find to my horror that it is *your* donkey. I appear on your doorstep with the remains and say—what? 'I say, old sport, I'm awfully sorry, etc., I've shot your donkey *by accident*'? Or '*by mistake*'? Then again, I go to shoot my donkey as before, draw a bead on it, fire—but as I do so, the beasts move, and to my horror yours falls. Again the scene on the doorstep—what do I say? 'By mistake'? Or '*by accident*'? (Austin 185)

The evident relish in the telling of the story somehow manages not to distract from the overarching philosophical purpose which guides and shapes the texture of the narration. In this case, it is a pair of stories that jointly form the parable from which a philosophical moral is to be drawn. Sometimes the larger philosophical point requires the telling of more than two stories, usually less than two. Starting especially with the pages later published as the first half of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell's writing begins to rejoice in its author's talent for telling such stories and deploying them to devastating effect as philosophical parables.

But in *Little Did I Know* we see that ability unleashed in a new way and towards a different end and with the result that a far larger number of stories need to be told than ever before in such work. What book

shows a philosopher better able to tell a story? The most substantial of the tales told within the overarching narrative are as long as short stories. Their punch lines are often (though not always) less important than the manner in which the stories themselves are told, making epics of events in the lives of some of the everyday characters who figure in this childhood. They are stories we cannot help cherishing for the attention they hold, for the mounting pleasure they construct, for the burst of feeling they release, and for the aptness of each of the turns in the telling of the larger story at which each of the smaller stories suddenly makes its appearance.

So, for those who carefully read the whole of this book, what a shock it is also to notice, in the story this book tells, that it is *this* father who is singled out in Quotation #1 as the benefactor of this gift to our protagonist! For in the story told in this book of the triangle of the mother and the father and the son, it is hardly to the father whom we are first encouraged to look to discover the sources of our author's gifts. It is rather to the mother (to her love of music, beauty, nobility and grace; to her sense of timing, occasion, tempo, posture, and tact) that we are first encouraged to look. She repeatedly appears to be the one in this narrative who is singled out as the source of culture and our author's true muse; whereas it is the father who tends periodically to burst in upon this scene of uplifting intimacy between mother and son with some episode of spiteful brutishness apparently designed to pour cold water on any view of the world that might distract his son from the cold hard facts of life. And yet nowhere does the Father's Gift assert itself more stunningly in these pages than at just those junctures to which our narrator first gradually builds and in which he then unfolds his most shattering anecdotes about his life with his father.

There are numerous moments in this book in which the father displays this other talent of his—his talent for pouring cold water over tender feelings—several of which are prepared at some length and subsequently cast their shadow over all of the pages to follow. Here is an example of the first notable appearance of such a story in the book: Quotation #2, the tale of the purple glass bowl with the domed top and the chocolate-covered mint wafers, is a description of a scene which takes place during the opening moments of the traumatic and fateful relocation from the comfortable world of the family's previous home on the South Side of Atlanta into a sparer and smaller dwelling on the city's north side. The young Stanley thus finds himself in this scene in the middle of an event which, on the one hand, has the aspect of a family get-together, while, on the other hand, also being called

upon to perform the ominous function of furnishing him, the family's only child, with his introduction to what will now be his family's new domicile, thereby also sealing his understanding of the fact that they will, indeed, have to abandon their old familiar and beloved home.

Quotation #2:

I evidently kept my feelings to myself, and wandered around trying to take an interest in the combination of familiar and strange objects in the living room. I recognized an ornamental object on a table at the side of the sofa, a purple glass bowl, somewhat wider but less deep than a drinking tumbler, set into a molded dull silver stand and covered with a dome top of matching silver inset with glass purple panels. I lifted the silver dome off the bowl to discover that it was filled with small chocolate-covered mint wafers whose tops were sprinkled with tiny white dots of hard candy, a treat I loved to sample when these used to fill this container in anticipation of company coming to the old house. I noticed that I was not alone in the room. My father was standing silently in the semidark at the other end of the sofa, apparently looking out of a window. I do not know if it would have crossed my mind before then that I had almost never been in a room alone with him, indeed, that I knew him much less well than I knew everyone else who had lived in the house I grew up in. . . . As I took one of the speckled wafers from the purple bowl, I said aimlessly, but somehow to break the silence with my father, "I didn't know we had these here." He lurched at me, wrenched the dome top and the wafer out of my hands, and said in a violent, growling whisper, "And you still don't know it!". . . . This is the moment I described as dating my knowledge that my father wanted me dead, or rather wanted me not to exist." (*Little* 17–18)

As that scene helps to make evident, when I speak of the Curse of the Father, I mean not only the recurring moments in which the father appears to curse his son but also the recurring ways in which he proves to be a curse of a father—for these two kinds of moment are often not easily distinguished in this narrative.

It is above all in passages such as Quotation #2 that our author reveals himself not only as a consummate practitioner of the father's skill in telling a story but also as a consummate critic of that story-teller of a father. Cavell has written elegantly elsewhere about the relation between philosophy and criticism—always seeking to retain the original non-academic sense of the latter word, as when it originally occurs in the compound *art criticism*. Criticism of a parent has seldom been carried to a higher art than in some of the passages in this work in which our author is moved to reflect upon that father. I am thinking here, above all, of the several passages in the book, with their several layers of irony and seriousness, which culminate in some version of the observation, "My father was a serious man."

What these stories preserve from the original art of the Yiddish story learned from the father is that they observe the strict decorum of retaining a larger point pertinent to the moment reached within the overarching narrative in which they are set; what they preserve from the original art of the philosophical parable learned from Austin is the way they climax, one by one, in a point underscored by a further final observation—sometimes ironic yet serious, sometimes aphoristic, sometimes even more indirect—which then transfers the final moment of reflection back upon the reader in the form of a task that he must complete himself. I am thinking here, for example, of observations such as the following about the dual meaning of the English word *mad*.

Quotation #3:

The fact that the English word *mad* means both angry and insane has repeatedly seemed to me wonderfully perceptive of it. (*Little* 126)

It is the juxtaposition of stories like Quotation #2 in these pages with observations like Quotation #3 that cause the elements of autobiography and philosophy within these pages to merge imperceptibly into one another in ways which, however different the relative proportion of the respective elements may be in *Little Did I Know*, cannot but help to recall various passages from Cavell's earlier work in which these elements also come together.

As an illustration of this point, I conclude with a memorable passage from Cavell's essay *The Avoidance of Love*, in which he reflects on the relation of another son to his father, that of Edgar to Lear—a passage which seems to be as much a commentary on central passages in his later autobiography as that later work now can also serve as one long commentary on it.

Quotation #4:

If one wishes a psychological explanation for Edgar's behavior the question to be answered is: Why does Edgar avoid his father's recognition? Two answers suggest themselves. (1) He is himself ashamed and guilty. . . . (2) He cannot bear the fact that his father is incapable, impotent, maimed. He wants his father still to be a father, powerful so that *he* can remain a child. For otherwise they are simply two human beings in need of one another, and it is not usual for parents and children to manage that transformation, becoming for one another nothing more, nothing less, than unaccommodated men. (284–5)

The essay as a whole is a meditation not only on a story about the relation between father and child, but also on how such a story can itself harbor and unleash untold depths of philosophy. *The Avoidance of*

Love is a retelling of the story of *King Lear* as it was never told before, on the occasion of the Vietnam War, and in a manner designed to provoke an American reader such as myself at the time of its writing to meditate on the question what would it mean for me to be able to accommodate myself first to the fact that this country is mangling human lives along with its promises to itself, and secondly to the fact that, my perception of its anger and madness notwithstanding, this country is *mine*, and I should acknowledge it as such. The essay's path to that question leads through many others, not least of which, as Quotation #4 itself makes plain, is the following: What would it mean for me to be able to accommodate myself first to the fact that, my perception of his anger and madness notwithstanding, my father is neither more nor less than one of my fellow creatures, one among many, with his own human all-too human flaws, and, secondly, that he is *my* father, and it falls to me to acknowledge him as such, as someone who is another human being in need?

When I speak of the Triumph of the Gift over the Curse, I do not only mean the performance of that existential task, as we see it accomplished over the course of the life whose story is told in these pages; I also mean the performance of the literary task we see performed before our eyes in the evident struggle in *Little Did I Know* to come to terms with *how* to tell this story—a story about a father whose importance is unassignable, because any possible measure of his significance would at once be too much and too little. He must be cast as neither hero nor villain, not even as either a central or a minor character. He must remain neither the source of the story's shape nor irrelevant to its outcome. This labor requires author and reader to reach the point in the unfolding of the story at which they are able to comprehend in a single thought that it is one and the same father who is able, in its early phases, to provoke in this son the self-destructive longing to consign his own father to hell and yet also able to be the one who, as it unfolds, is able to bequeath to this same son the secret of the trick of how properly to tell that amazing Yiddish story which is the tale of this life.

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