THE ADULT IN A BABY BONNET

CONVERSATIONS WITH STANLEY CAVELL WITTGENSTEIN AND ST. AUGUSTINE

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Cover photo of the author and her mother
taken in Ellensburg, Washington, 1940.

Title page photo of The Three Stooges in *Creeps*, 1956.

"The only person I knew with whom I could discuss such things was Mary Randall," Stanley Cavell writes in his autobiography, *Little Did I Know*, about the first time that he read Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. The question who is Mary Randall? is one I can answer with authority. I am Mary Randall's daughter. As for the other philosophers besides Stanley Cavell invoked in my title, I have no authority to write about them. I am a poet who reads philosophy for understanding and pleasure, at times enthusiastically, but infrequently. Then again, I have read enough of St. Augustine and Wittgenstein to understand that no one else has authority as an explainer of their writing either. Their work cannot be "explained" any more than a Zen *koan* can.

The Availability of Cavell

When I was twenty, I took two philosophy courses at Berkeley, both taught by Stanley Cavell. I had known him, by then, for some fifteen years. He and my mother met in Berkeley at the end of World War II. She and I had come there from Seattle to prepare the way for my father, who was awaiting his discharge papers while stationed at the army hospital in San Antonio. Like thousands of other returning veterans, George Randall had decided that Berkeley would be an ideal place to live and go to school on the GI bill. The influx of vets created the acute housing shortage that greeted my mom and me when, in 1945, we arrived. My mother had sold the rooming house in Seattle that she ran during my father's absence, but for a few days, I remember, the money was still "in escrow" (a mysterious place, in my five-year-old imagination). There was some delay about the release of these funds, causing us to wonder where we were going to sleep. Even when the money came, finding housing was not easy. Those landlords who did have vacancies could afford to be choosy. "No kids, no dogs," said the vacancy signs. I stood beside my mom, gripping her hand, as door after door was slammed in our faces. We slept on a friend's living room rug (someone else had the sofa), our sleep interrupted by the howls of their new infant and the stench of dirty diapers. From there we moved to a tenement whose other occupants were Chinese, whole families residing in single rooms. Unfamiliar cooking smells

drifted from doorways in which the carcasses of unidentifiable birds hung upside down on laundry cord.

In this atmosphere, Stanley and my mother met and fell in love. She was twenty-five, beautiful, brunette, sophisticated (in Stanley's eyes)—an "older woman" (by all of six years) deeply immersed in an unhappy marriage. Stanley was a musical prodigy who had had his own jazz band at the age of fourteen, entered college at the age of fifteen, and was, by the time of their meeting, completing a degree in music by writing an original score for a drama department production of *Green Pastures*. (On opening night, I sat in the seat directly behind him while he conducted, a thrilling experience for me, aged six.) By then, my mother's Seattle rooming house was out of escrow and she had purchased its Berkeley counterpart, a brown shingle on the edge of campus, where most of her tenants were theater- and music-department students, Stanley among them. She recalled meeting him at a party there, when, hearing complaints of clogged plumbing, she elbowed her way through the little crowd that had formed around the bathroom door to find Stanley entertaining them by doing a fandango with the toilet plunger. (Stanley believed they met earlier, when my mother was in Berkeley scouting out the territory the previous year).

I am tempted to say that Stanley, my mother, and I fell in love. It seems right to include myself. As my mother's only child, I was included in her life as an appendage, an arm or a foot; she took me with her everywhere or, at least, I was permitted this illusion. Stanley's memoir recalls me as "a dazzling six year old," and perhaps because my mom was married they channeled their love through me at first (which would explain the happiness I felt in their company). Stanley was more demonstrative with me than any other adults I had known. He would get down on the floor, roll around, play, tickle, and tease with abandon. Cathleen, Stanley's wife since 1967, suggested to me that he and I were more like siblings than like father and child—pointing to the age difference between my mom and him and to the circumstance that Stanley was so precocious he was cheated out of childhood. There may be something to this interpretation, but to six-year-old me he was an adult. With his wide grin, thick golden hair (I remember golden hair on his knuckles), fuzzy sweaters, and witty performances at the piano, he reminded me of Danny Kaye, whom I had seen in a now forgotten film called *The Kid from Brooklyn*. My view of Stanley was shaped by my mother's—and my mother, for perhaps the only time in her life, was in love.

I remember going to see the John Ford film *My Darling Clementine* with Stanley, and dinners at the True Blue cafeteria, where he and my mom would stay in the booth talking, among the mounting congestion of coffee cups and dishes used as ashtrays, seemingly forever. If I grew bored with their conversation, I would kneel backward in the booth and eavesdrop on the table behind us. I was a little girl who preferred listening to grown-up talk than playing with kids—an activity in which I felt myself to be an impostor. I recall, one evening at dusk, the three of us walking across the wide, freshly cut lawn outside the women's gym where, in 1946, wild rabbits

hopped among the hedges and cement urns. I was still young enough to take pride in my ability to balance on narrow ledges—like a tightrope walker, as I imagined—and so, at a remove, but looking to them for occasional acknowledgment of my derring do, I noticed that Stanley's face was red, his cheeks wet with tears. I probably had never seen a grown man cry before. "Why is Stanley crying?" I asked. "Maybe because he is with a rude little girl who asks too many questions," my mother replied.

Not long after, she and I took a train to San Antonio to visit my father, bedridden in an army hospital but not because of a war injury (he had seen no action). He had a terrible skin condition that left his legs raw and oozing pus. "He's allergic to the army" was my mother's explanation. We stayed in an apartment, visiting the hospital nearly every evening until his discharge came. I had started first grade at Oxford School in Berkeley but was skipped to second grade in San Antonio because I already knew how to read. On my father's release, we moved to Carmel, California, instead of Berkeley, perhaps to avoid the housing shortage (or to keep some distance from Stanley). My father made a living as a house painter. Deeply depressed, my mother, who could hardly afford it, went into psychoanalysis, which entailed weekly trips by Greyhound bus to Berkeley.

Stanley's presence continued to be felt. I remember letters from him and gifts, among them a copy of *The World Is Round* by Gertrude Stein, with illustrations by Francis Rose.

We moved back to the Bay Area in 1948, and I enrolled in fourth grade. In 1949, my mother divorced my father, partly to make herself available to true love, should it come to call. Stanley came to see my mother and me. They sat on the sofa with nine-year-old me between them. They each took one of my hands. They asked if I would like Stanley to come live with us, "like a father," and I said yes—an avowal not without expense, for I felt I was betraying my father; but I loved Stanley more. We agreed on the day and the hour; all that remained was for Stanley to go to Sacramento and tell his folks. (My mother and I had already been taken to Sacramento to meet them and knew they did not like us much. An older woman, a divorcee, a gentile—my mother was an unsuitable wife for their son in many ways.) In the end, Stanley could not face his folks, and he could not face my mother either. He sent her a telegram signed "Vronsky," as if to make light of what he no doubt considered the possibility she would throw herself under a train. Instead of coming to live with us, Stanley accepted a "bribe" from his parents ("bribe" was his word) and flew to New York to attend Juilliard. One would suppose that by this means Stanley had ended the affair, but no: a year later, he initiated correspondence. "I began writing letters," he writes in his memoir, "and receiving replies from her that I awaited painfully almost from the day after posting one of mine."

How is this episode relevant to whatever I came to understand, through Stanley, of Wittgenstein? The courses of his that I took were "Introduction to Philosophy" and "Philosophy of Religion."

The curriculum of the first was preordained, but into the second Stanley managed to smuggle some Wittgenstein and also the "ordinary language philosophers" with whom he had studied at Cambridge. He managed to teach out of his own deepest preoccupations, the internal dialogues that became his dissertation, the lectures that became *Must We Mean What We Say?*—from his thoughts, that is, while pacing behind the wall erected by a student carpenter, at my mother's request, to divide the incredibly cheap apartment she found for Stanley and me, above the Campus Bar in North Oakland, into two private living spaces. For me, it was convenient both to campus and to the bus on which I commuted to my job as a waitress in North Beach. I worked late on the weekends, and was glad to step off the bus at my own door, even if, because the flat was above a bar, doing so meant stepping over a drunk asleep in the stairwell. The location was convenient for my mother also, being halfway between the household where, for the sake of his daughter Rachel, Stanley spent part of the week, while his divorce was becoming final, and the tiny garden cottage where my mom was then living only six blocks away.

It was a talky romance. Does anyone talk that much anymore? When we were not talking, each of us, about his or her own case history, we went to movies and plays and afterward, at home or over tea, or in a booth at Edy's Ice Cream Parlor over caramel sundaes, we talked about what we had seen. We talked about Fellini's *La Strada* and Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*. We went to the opera and talked about it. We went to Irving Blau's production of *Waiting for Godot* and talked about it. Stanley and my mother came to see me play Joan of Arc in *The Lark* at the University of San Francisco, and we talked about it. In the fifties, we talked about Existentialism, about *The Outsider* by Colin Wilson and *Man's Fate* by Malraux. My mother explained to me Sartre's paper cutter. We talked about the loyalty oath. We talked about philosophy, Freudian psychoanalysis, literature, and art. In 1960, we talked about the Eichmann trial and *One-Eyed Jacks*, the Brando film Stanley was thinking deeply about in order to work through some ideas about vengeance; we talked about *Great Expectations*, Cassius Clay's name change, why Seymour Glass committed suicide.

Stanley and I did not talk much in our shared digs, intent as we were upon respecting one another's privacy, but I remember hearing him sigh behind the wall—long, many-tiered sighs, lowered in descending flourishes like ostrich plumes on a courtier's hat, or like Hamlet's sigh, as described by Ophelia ("a sigh so piteous and profound / As it did seem to shatter all his bulk / and end his being"). These sighs occurred at almost regular intervals, like birdsong, as he paced, and smoked, and brooded on his dissertation. If I wrote a really good poem, as happened once or twice that year, I might knock on his door and ask him to read it, or we might meet in the kitchen, where we would talk while waiting for the tea water to boil. In addition, Stanley and I met once a week for lunch—a kindness to me on his part, I think, a way of helping me over self-doubts to which his relationship with my mom may have contributed. Because it was not a

marriage, she and I had no social claim on Stanley, and feelings of not belonging, fears of presuming, seemed to follow me everywhere. Their final break-up was still three years away, but by then, I think, they both saw it coming, and Stanley may have been attempting to give me whatever sense of inclusion he could before deciding to leave Berkeley for Harvard.

I was a passionate student. The Berkeley faculty club was glamorous in my eyes. My mother's disillusionment with Stanley had not rubbed off on me. To be included in the fellowship of professors was the stuff of my dreams. Stanley's lectures, which occurred in the hour just before lunch, were often the subject of our conversations. Stanley's lectures, though popular, were as difficult as the texts of Wittgenstein he was teaching. He made you feel very smart, although afterward it was hard to summarize what had been said. Being close to Stanley gave me an advantage over other students. I knew, for instance, that the aim of Stanley's lectures was not to impart information so much as to lead listeners to an experience—the experience of being confounded. And not just any experience of being confounded, but of being confounded in a particular way. Stanley placed ideas before us very deliberately, like someone placing sticks to build a fire.

In an essay titled "The Availability of Wittgenstein" in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Stanley talks about the difficulties inherent in making Wittgenstein more available to students and lay readers. He quotes *The Blue and Brown Books*: "The man who is philosophically puzzled sees a law [= rule] in the way a word is used and, attempting to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results. . . . For what has to be 'explained'," Stanley continues, "is, put flatly and bleakly, this":

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place. . . , just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of an organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.

The acquisition of language is "terrifying"—a doctrine that, if taught in a poet's classroom, might engender, among the students attending, a philosopher, and if taught in a philosopher's might yield a poet. In any case, the "old professor" in my first book was made in Stanley's image:

“Take a gander at these two—”
Slapping down the old professor’s
photograph and one I hardly
recognize as Mrs. Woo,
circa 1942—
“Was it him? Was it him?
Think again,” he says. I do.

Words like “booked” and “booking”
mingle in my brain.
A clown, led handcuffed from the room,
looks back at me in sympathy,
a painted teardrop, greasepaint blue,
sliding down his cheek like rain.

“But I don’t understand,” I say at length.
“It must be almost dawn, and it
was none of them, none of them,
for no one’s done me any wrong.”

The minute that I’ve said the words,
afraid that they’re too strong,
I rise about to—
Zap!
Somebody pulls a switch
and suddenly

the lights come on.

The old professor at the window turns.
His eyes are moist and fond.
“Okay Little Girl,” he says,
“Your Judgment Day is done.

Still don't understand, Sweetheart—?"

He lifts the window shade
and very, very gradually
an awful light begins to dawn.

The Adult in the Baby Bonnet

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* begins, famously, in Latin, with an excerpt from St. Augustine's *Confessions* (I.8), translated as follows in a footnote:

> When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.

We recognize the conventions that St. Augustine describes with a condescending smile, and how could it be otherwise, considering the root of condescend? We look down upon the infant Augustine, and we smile. The scene is familiar even now, almost two millennia later. Our teaching methods—"the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body" (such a curiously oblique phrase—is Augustine too shy to say lips and hands?)—have not changed since the fourth century. We have all participated at one time or another. As Augustine declares, the behavior seems almost instinctual. But there is something odd about this picture. Augustine depicts his infant self as if he were an adult in a baby bonnet, for here is an infant who conceives of language, what it is, how it works, which muscles are needed to pronounce individual sounds. There is a sophisticated adult mind, fully formed, inside the infant body, a little man so vain that he waits, for fear of embarrassing himself, almost until he has mastered the language he is being taught before he ventures to speak it. St. Augustine appreciates his teachers ("Their intention . . . shewn by their bodily movements"), but his admiration is tempered by his awareness that this behavior may be effortless ("the natural language of all peoples"). He is already a philosopher and knows a paradox when he sees one.

Wittgenstein calls this kind of teaching "osten- sive" (*Philosophical Investigations* 1.7). It is easy to see why. Mother holds up a blue mug and says *cup*. Grandmother holds it up and says *blue*.

Sister, later, picking it up, says, "Look at this! You've chipped your *sippy-up*." We might reasonably conclude that acquiring language in infancy and early childhood is impossible. Not knowing any language, what language is, what language is for, or how it works, let alone the parts of speech or the rules of grammar essential to learning a foreign language as adults, how can a little child begin to acquire it? It is like “acquiring” the theory of relativity without yet knowing how to count. Still, children who are deprived of ostensive instruction not only fail to acquire language, they suffer lifelong psychological scars and even perish from the lack. Our “teaching” may be “ostensive,” but, even so, it is crucial.

Why have we left up to chance and impulse what is probably the most important instruction the child receives? Is it because we know intuitively that the content does not matter? What matters is touch, the ice cold touch of well water on the palm of Helen Keller. Word connected to thing through touch, bonding and branding us as members of the human family.

The idea that language is inadequate is fashionable these days. I had no trouble collecting several examples in my weekend reading—for example, a “Playbill” summary of the accomplishments of a new playwright praises her for showing “how language can be an obstacle as well as a tool.” Calling language a tool misrepresents and underestimates it. I came away from my undergraduate philosophy classes and my conversations with Stanley impressed that language is mysterious: unlike a tool, we do not understand how it works or where its energy comes from. Language creates images that rival those of the camera, and, like negatives in a darkroom, its meanings emerge over time. Language alone could almost compensate for two nonfunctioning sense organs in the all but feral child who was Helen Keller. Language is not a tool but an organic part of us, like antennae. It is a mystical property of human beings and, as Stanley taught us, “terrifying.”

An Infant’s Diary

1.

All morning I lie in my crib basking in the ecstatic white bliss of the ceiling with its glowing white bowl at the center and, at the center of the glowing bowl, a dark nipple of opaque white glass from which it is hard to separate myself. I am omniscient. I may be considered little, but my head is large in proportion to my body. Inside of it, as in a conch shell, I hear the murmur of innumerable voices, audible but indistinct, speaking in every language. Babel! My first tongue.

2.

Sometimes the light is blocked by big faces hanging over me. Their noses with their enlarged pores are like strawberries. I am uplifted and pressed against a scratchy tweed or ample bosom.

Erg. I gurgle and flail. There is an awkward moment when my head falls backward, but someone catches it and cradles it in her palm. My stem isn't strong enough to hold the flower. Oh, those aren't the words, I know. I have no language yet for what has happened. But you get the idea. Lips caked with coral lipstick are bunched and pressed against my temple. I hear the word grandma and am overwhelmed in a perfume squeeze. I am admired by everyone. Then they set me down in my crib again and go away. I float in the pure white light of the void. With my flailing legs and arms, I conduct the unfinished symphony of the world.

3.

This morning I was bundled and taken out into the cold air and the leathery smell of the car. Father McDonald flecked my face with cold drops of water. I cried out too late. Now I have been named. Part of me is irrevocably isolated and separated from the rest. I howl with grief.

4.

The One With The Smell That Makes Me Dizzy leaned over my crib and lifted me up. She gave me an Eskimo kiss and made a noise like a Native American dancer (Hi-eve!), followed by a growl. Hi-eve! Gre-re-ram maw—I get that she is saying "Hi Grandma," but why is she saying it to me? *She's* the grandma.

5.

"Can you say 'Hi Grandma'?" No, I cannot. I am like a turtle on its back. I cannot even sit up or roll over. All morning, rocking my body, rocking back and forth, I have tried to get momentum. Finally, I gave up and kicked so hard I flung my bootie far across the room. Where is Mama? I called and called. Sucking on this cold rubber nipple only makes me mad.

6.

At night before I fall asleep, I practice. After they turn out the lights, leaving me alone in the dark, where I cannot be embarrassed by failure, I try to shape my lips to form the sounds. Sometimes I sing to myself.

7.

This morning I pulled myself up into a sitting position by the bars of my crib. I tried to say, "Bring me my bear." It will be better when I have teeth. Nevertheless, I know one thing for sure. St. Augustine was right: I am not parroting sounds that I do not understand. I know what the words mean before I can say them. (Obviously—I could not keep this diary if I did not.)

8.

Today I made a noise inadvertently, it just slipped out. How excited Mama and Grandma became. They called to Dad to come quick, and Mama jiggled me in her arms and kept saying “Who’s that? Who’s that?” As if she did not know that it was Daddy.

Meanwhile, almost in spite of them, whole clumps of words have started to become transparent. Yesterday I overhead someone saying “Has the mail come yet?” and understood it perfectly, although I had no way of showing so, except to wave my legs.

9.

“Bottle,” Grandma says, giving me the warm milk. “Gram,” I say, but it comes out *marg*.

10.

It is charades all day around here with them gesturing at things, opening their eyes very wide and enunciating very clearly. Then they look at me expectantly.

11.

I was sitting in my high chair, where I had been placed rather roughly (someone was in a pique), when Dada, striding out the door on his way to work, turned, made his hand like a gun, aimed at my cup and said “blue.” “Don't. You'll only confuse the poor dear!” Mama set the cup down so hard the milk sloshed onto my high chair. Then she turned it around, so I could see the front, and said “cow.” Almost in spite of them, gradually I am beginning to understand. The world is being filled in, like a coloring book with crayons, with words. Soon I will be a toddler and will be able to ask for my blue cup, and to say what kind of animal is pictured on the front, and even to read the name Elsie printed there, among four-leaf clovers.

12.

I lie in bed listening to the steady drip of a faucet. I wonder why it fits perfectly with the tune of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Am I making the song fit the drip by the way I am singing it? Could any song be made to fit? And how am I capable of having these thoughts without having words for them?, I wonder, as the great mystery of language—our collective, semiconscious creation, forever changing and renewing itself, mysterious and hard, dark as the ocean—washes over me, and I fall asleep.

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