

Richard Eldridge
Swarthmore College
Department of Philosophy

Abstract_Title:

Criticism and the Risk of the Self: Cavell's Modernism

Abstract:

Two guiding ideas of Stanley Cavell's career are 1) that the activities of philosophy, criticism, and (modern) artmaking are importantly like one another, and 2) that the self is at risk or under scrutiny in each of them. In criticism, in particular, one is attempting to give articulate voice to the sources in the work of one's responses to it, in the hope that those responses will be, to some extent, confirmed, stabilized, and shared. This enterprise of criticism is distinguished from noncritical literary history.

After tracing these guiding ideas, I go on to ask why, according to Cavell these activities of criticism are important and whether he is right that they are. One answer is that the (modern) bearing of selfhood involves not so much immediate immersion in 'natural' activities and more awareness of alternatives and orientation toward futurity than were quite characteristic of pre-modern life. A second answer is that the self is ontologically 'immigrant' in virtue of its emergence via attitudinally tangled engagements with others.

Finally, the thought that Cavell is right that the modern self is always already at risk will be filled in by looking at the form of satisfaction that is available to a modern self. This form of satisfaction involves acknowledgment and gratitude rather than knowledge and mastery. An example of the achievement of this form of satisfaction as it is represented in a modern lyric poem will be considered: probably from one of Goethe's short lyrics.