

Sandra Laugier, *A Romanticism of Democracy: Emerson, Thoreau, Cavell, Malick*

Translation by Daniela Ginsburg (from *Multitudes*, 2014)

[This romanticism] reasserts that, in whatever locale I find myself, I am to locate myself. It speaks of terror, but suggests elation—for the shaking of sentiment never got us home, nor the shiver of the picturesque. The faith of this romanticism, overcoming the old, is that we can still be moved to move, that we are free, if we will, to step upon our transport.

Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (1971, 114)

To “reinsert the human voice in philosophical thinking” (Cavell 1996, 63) and to draw out the ethical and political consequences of this reinsertion has been the goal of Stanley Cavell’s work. For Cavell, the challenge, and aim, of ordinary language philosophy—Wittgenstein’s in particular—is first to understand that language is *spoken*, pronounced by a human voice within a form of life, and then to move from the question of the common usage of language to the more novel, less explored question of the relationship between an individual speaker and his or her community. For Cavell, this new question implies a redefinition of subjectivity in language on the basis of the relationship between an individual voice and a linguistic community; that is, on the basis of the rightness or fit of agreements in language. Here, voice implies a claim: an individual voice claims universal validity and within that validity searches for the right tonality. The quest for this “rightness” [*justesse*¹]¹—for an absolute expression that aligns the inner with the outer—combines language, politics, and ethics. It also defines romanticism, at least its

¹ “Just think of the expression (and the meaning of the expression) ‘mot juste’ [*das treffende Wort*],” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 266, 209. In French, *juste* and *justesse* connote rightness, fittingness, accuracy as well as fairness, justice.

legacy in America according to Cavell, Emerson, and Thoreau: a romanticism of democracy that fulfills the romantic dream of re-appropriating the ordinary world through individual expression.

To speak of our subjectivity as the route back to our conviction in reality is to speak of romanticism. Perhaps romanticism can be understood as the natural struggle between the representation and the acknowledgment of our subjectivity (between the acting out and the facing off of ourselves, as psycho-analysts would more or less say). Hence Kant, and Hegel; hence Blake secreting the world he believes in; hence Wordsworth competing with the history of poetry by writing out himself, writing himself back into the world. (Cavell 1971, 22)

The Political as the Continuation of Romanticism

The philosophical importance of turning to “what we say” becomes clear when we ask not only what “saying” is but also what this “we” is. How do *I* know what *we* say in certain circumstances? How is the language I speak, which I inherit from others, my own? Cavell hears echoes of these questions in the opening paragraph of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (which begins with a quote from Augustine, since “all my words belong to another” [Cavell 1989, 74]). This first paragraph contains all the classic themes of the *Philosophical Investigations*: community, meaning, language learning. Out of these elements emerges an understanding of language based on collective agreement, inherited meaning, and learning by ostensive definition. But another theme—one which is equally social, but less obvious in the *Investigations*—can be discovered here: the theme of the subject, voice, and expression. For a long time the disparity between these two

themes caused critics to ignore the importance of the second one for Wittgenstein, even to see the first as a refutation of the second: community as refutation of the individual voice. Cavell's contribution in *The Claim of Reason* is to bring these two themes together and show that the question of agreement in common language is precisely the *skeptical* question of voice: the question of knowing how my voice can be "ours." The question of description and description's adequacy to its object (which Wittgenstein settled in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by taking a representationalist view—a proposition is a picture of a states of affairs) turns out to be the question of the truth of confession; the question of expressive rightness. To thus go from truth to expression is indeed to follow the romantic project of re-appropriating the world through subjective exploration—here, through the quest for voice. Such romanticism appears in *The Claim of Reason*, where Cavell takes up the question of expression from a skeptical point of view. To be able to take on right expression is

to acknowledge that your expressions in fact express you, that they are yours, that you are in them. This means allowing yourself to be comprehended, something you can always deny. Not to deny it is, I would like to say, to acknowledge your body, and the body of your expressions, to be yours, you on earth, all there will ever *be* of you. (Cavell 1979, 383)

To so acknowledge means to accept expression as identically inner (it expresses me) *and* outer (it exposes me). Subjectivity is thus defined in its movement to re-appropriate its voice, which is also a way of approaching reality. On Cavell's reading, skepticism is the symptom of a broader impossibility: the inability to hear ordinary language and thus to be able speak, to *mean*. The inability to be the subject of one's words—e.g. to be able to speak the common language—is the

political *and* romantic version taken by Wittgensteinian skepticism, which can be countered by re-appropriating the ordinary world through our language practices (Cavell 1988). Cavell demonstrates the fragility and profundity of our language agreements and our forms of life, thus pointing to another romantic dimension of ordinary language philosophy: the fact that our ordinary language is based on nothing but itself is not only a source of disquiet about the validity of what we do and say, it is the revelation of a truth about ourselves: “I” am the only possible source of such validity. And in the constant quest for a voice, for the right tone, there is a simultaneously subjective and collective requirement, which Thoreau and Emerson express most pointedly:

to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost (Emerson 2000, 132).

This thought leads Emerson to his famous apostrophe “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist” (134) and to his criticism of conformism and moralism, which he understands as the inability to speak and mean what one says. For Cavell, true morality lies in “finding one’s voice,” in achieving the right tone, in hitting on the appropriate expression for a certain situation. This requires both an individual constitution (“the only right is what is after my constitution” [Emerson 2000, 135]) and a shared one: a political Constitution that allows each person to find expression, to be expressed by the common, and to accept expressing the common. Democracy is both what gives me a political voice and what can take this voice away from me; it may also deceive and betray me to the point that I no longer want to speak for it or

let it speak for me, in my name. In my relationship to the community, my participation is constantly in question, under discussion, in *conversation*.

Since the granting of consent entails acknowledgement of others, the withdrawal of consent entails the same acknowledgement: I have to say *both* "It is not mine any longer" (I am no longer responsible for it; it no longer speaks for me) *and* "It is no longer ours"...(the original "we" is no longer bound together by consent...so it no longer exists). (Cavell 1972, 27)

But if I refuse consent, I do not thereby withdraw from the community: withdrawal, dissonance, retreat into the unknown are all inherent to my belonging to or desire for community.

Human beings do not naturally desire isolation and incomprehension, but union or reunion, call it community. It is in faithfulness to that desire that one declares oneself unknown. (And of course the faithfulness, the desire, and the declaration may all be based on illusion. The conceptual connection, however, would remain as real as ever.) (Cavell 1979, 463)

Thus, community is by definition something *claimed*; it is not foundational. It is *me*, my voice, that determines my agreement, and not the other way around. I determine my consent to or refusal of society, and this is what makes my choice a potentially revolutionary one.

I suppose I do not want to accept my society "once and for all" as I do the principles of justice: society, judged by those principles, may come to forfeit my loyalty. But how would the principles carry the revolutionary potential of consent, or consent forfeited, if I did not at the same time give my consent to society? (Cavell 1990, 107)

It is here and now—daily, ordinarily—that my consent to my society is settled. It is not that my consent is calculated or conditional; rather, it is constantly in *conversation* and in conversion. It is shot through with dissent, just as my relationship to the ordinary world is shot through with skepticism. By turning to

Wittgenstein, Emerson, and Thoreau, Cavell wants to show that there are no rules for how to follow social rules; no rules that limit or regulate the acceptability of claims and their expression. Democracy must include actions and expressions that radically call the institutions of the social game into question—not out of tolerance or “openness,” but out of perfectionism.

Democracy of the Ordinary

Here we rediscover the aim of democracy: to achieve right expression. For Wittgenstein and Emerson, what is private is merely what refuses expression: the private is inexpressiveness, conformity. For Cavell, the accord that allows my private voice to be truly expressive is based purely on the particular validity of voice: my individual voice claims to be—is—a “universal voice.” *Claim* is what a voice does when it bases itself on nothing other than itself in order to simultaneously establish universal consent and a relationship to the real; Cavell and Emerson ask us to formulate such claiming as the principle of our democratic practices. This re-inscription of the subjective at the heart of the political is also the form given here to political romanticism, which defines the principle of democracy as each individual’s right to assess his or her needs and happiness:

suppose that romanticism can be thought of as the discovery, or one rediscovery, of the subjective; the subjective as the exceptional; or the discovery of freedom as a state in which each subject claims its right to recognition, or acknowledgment; the right to name and assess its own satisfaction. (Cavell 1972, 466)

This democratic version of romanticism is not a new foundation for politics—it is a demand, and a permanent dissatisfaction. And this is exactly the meaning of moral

perfectionism: it is not moralism (the quest for a defined, determinate perfection), but rather a projection always beyond and outside oneself toward a model created through this very projection and never fixed once and for all. The quest for voice and rightness is thus a constant rejection of conformity—including conformity to the moral and political principles one holds; including *conformity to oneself*. This points to one aspect of the principle of democracy: the pursuit of happiness (also a title of Cavell's [1981]), which is both a political and a romantic pursuit (as Will Smith observes bitterly in the 2007 film *The Pursuit of Happyness*, "I understand now why the founding fathers said *pursuit of happiness*").

This is why, in defining ordinary language by voice—the voice of an I who speaks in the name of all, in that arrogation of voice that is the mark of the human—one does *not* reconstitute a new subject, the subject of speech. To mean what one says is simultaneously to know oneself, others, and the world—that is, the ordinary world, the one in which romanticism *finds* itself.

What they had not realized was what they were saying, or, what they were *really* saying, and so had not known *what they meant*. To this extent, they had not known themselves, and not known the world. I mean, of course, the ordinary world. That may not be all there is, but it is important enough: morality is that world, and so are force and love; so is art and a part of knowledge (the part which is about the world); and so is religion (wherever God is). (Cavell 1976, 40)

The critique of conformism defines the condition of ordinary democratic morality and the necessity of dissent for anyone who wishes to know what he or she means. The ideal political conversation—the conversation of democracy—is thus

not rational discussion, but rather a circulation of words in which no voice is minor, and no one is without voice. Claim and dissent are neither excesses nor constraints of democracy; they define the very nature of true democratic conversation. This tradition of dissent is rooted in the American tradition and has developed over the course of America's many contemporary social and political movements. It combines consent and disobedience, as if the original dream of America, the principles of the founding fathers, could be realized through internal dissent.

This discovery of individuality in expression also defines ordinary romanticism, and Thoreau and Emerson inherit both from Coleridge and Wordsworth and from the spirit of the American Revolution. We should note that this romanticism is a post-romanticism, just as for Cavell, the modern is always post-modern, aiming beyond itself. Cavell, like Emerson, like Thoreau, and like "occupiers" the world over, does not refer to the picturesque, the trembling of affect, or the exaltation of the self, proper to "old Europe" to define ordinary romanticism. In "The American Scholar," Emerson explicitly stated: "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic...I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low" (Emerson 2000, 57). His romanticism is a romanticism of the ordinary: "What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the form and the gait of the body" (ibid.).

This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground. (Emerson 2000, 55-56)

From the passage above we see that this revolution, the building up of a new human, must first of all renounce the “European” romanticism that exalts self and affect, and replace it with a new individualism based on self confidence; in the same way, this ground, which is like a shore littered with washed-up materials, will replace or destroy the philosophical idea of ground, foundation, principle.

Skepticism and the Humanization of the World

This ordinary romanticism shares a principle with today’s occupation and civil disobedience movements. If we are to progress toward the human and attain the ordinary world and adequate expression, self-reliance compels us to seek neither subjective confidence nor contact with ourselves, but rather our capacity to be expressive, to be *public*. It is by claiming myself that my obscurity, my opacity to myself, becomes political and my confidence in myself becomes confidence in *us*, in a plural self, selves—*because* I give myself to be heard by others. We must discover ourselves; that is, we must first make ourselves obscure to ourselves. Thoreau seeks obscurity in order to reach true clarity: “I do not suppose that I have attained to obscurity, but I should be proud if no more fatal fault were found with my pages on this score than was found with the Walden ice” (Thoreau 2004, 316). Thoreau advocates accepting one’s obscurity to oneself, and within this obscure claim to oneself, we hear the common voice of plural selves raised even at the cost of dissonance, isolation, and the unknown. Thoreau sees this claim as the antidote to men’s “lives of quiet desperation.” Here again is the goal of politics: to locate in

ourselves and in others the words that “chagrin us” (Emerson 2000, 137) in the strong sense, and dispossess us of our voices and our world. This is a perfectionist claim, one immanent to and inherent in democratic life.

About *Walden*, Cavell writes:

We have yet “*to get our living together*” (*Walden* Chapter I, paragraph 100), to be whole, and to be one community. We are not settled, we have not clarified ourselves; our character, and the character of the nation, is not...transparent to itself. (*Walden*, IX, 34)

The romanticism expressed here is a democratic romanticism, a romanticism of the banal, in a sense; a deeply realistic and pragmatic romanticism. At the very end of “Experience,” Emerson announces “the transformation of genius into practical power,” calling this “true romance” (Emerson 2000, 326).² The ordinary is an end, not a starting point. Cavell, as he concludes *The Claim of Reason*, identifies the romantic quest with the quest for the ordinary:

The wish to be extraordinary, exceptional, unique, thus reveals the wish to be ordinary, everyday. (One does not, after all, wish to become a monster, even though the realization of one’s wish for uniqueness would make one a monster). So both the wish for the exceptional and for the everyday are foci of romanticism. One can think of romanticism as the discovery that the everyday is an exceptional achievement. Call it the achievement of the human. (Cavell 1979, 463)

However, clearly there can be something vexing about a passionate desire to be ordinary, and this is a significant risk run by political romanticism: “Think of the spectacle of the likes of Rousseau and Thoreau and Kierkegaard and Tolstoy and Wittgenstein going around hoping to be ordinary, preaching the everyday as the

² “There is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.”

locale of the sublime!" (Cavell 1979, 464). For Cavell, romanticism discovered the "fact of adolescence," that is: "the task of wanting and choosing adulthood, along with the impossibility of this task" (ibid.); for Kant, skepticism is the philosophical version of adolescence—thinking that has not yet reached the age of "mature and virile judgment."

The choice of finitude "means the acknowledgement of the existence of finite others, which is to say, the choice of community." The impossibility here lies in the fact that these choices about community have been handed down to us by the past and they demand conformity. "So romantics dream of revolution, and break their hearts" (ibid).

Beyond sentimentalism and exaltation, romanticism in politics lies in human claims made even in the face of loss. The claim of today's revolts is a new cogito that demands and produces proof of the existence of the human. These movements reflect

the apprehension that human subjectivity, the concept of human selfhood, is threatened; that it must be found and may be lost; that if one's existence is to be proven it can be proven only from oneself; and that upon that proof turns what proof there is in the continued existence of the human as such. (Cavell 1979, 465)

The new romantic confidence in oneself/in ourselves makes it possible to find in each individual and in the ordinary the resources to rediscover the human. In this regard, Emerson's return to the ordinary when he travels to Europe is highly significant; there, he rediscovers ancient splendors while denouncing the romantic illusion of the grandeur of a distant and somehow authentic art. The romantic re-

appropriation of antiquity can occur only in fragments and reproductions. In a passage from the journal he kept during his stay in Rome in the spring of 1833, Emerson writes of spotting, in a “wilderness of marble,” the Torso of Belvedere, celebrated by Michelangelo and Winckelmann, and compares it to a veteran of the Revolutionary War: “Here too was the Torso Hercules, as familiar to the eyes as some old revolutionary cripple” (Emerson 1984, 100). The romantic use of citation and the constant, fragmented returns to European heritage in Emerson and Thoreau thus stem from a claim that is at once inseparably romantic *and* realist (because revolutionary).

Of course, one may read this as an expression of the rejection of the picturesque so clearly formulated at the end of “The American Scholar” ... It should be noted, however, that the remark reveals above all the profound and ancient practice of making moldings or engravings of masterpieces of ancient sculpture—in short, the practice of reproduction, the only channel open to the American Scholar whose advent Emerson calls for. It is both a naturalization of the artistic fragment and a reminder of the constant presence of survivors from the founding of the nation, colossal even as they diminish and impossible to forget in the small communities of New England around the year 1825-1830. (Fournier 2002, 23)

This brings us back once again to the revolution (both past and future) that Emerson calls for at the end of “Experience”: “Here are the materials strewn along the ground.”

But we must realize that Emerson’s “ground” has the position or capacity to dislodge the philosophical idea of basis or foundation. Emerson doubles and naturalizes “ground” with “materials”—the ground is not a base on which to construct philosophy, Culture, or revolution, but rather is the very *material* of the ground. This brings to mind the ability to occupy ground, to re-appropriate the land

(the land beneath our feet) that today's movements deploy and which we see at work in political romanticism, which has taken on a new form in ecological struggles and in the idea of the "global": the idea of a democratized earth defined by its occupation, including mobile, circulatory forms of occupation.

The idea of 'ground' itself is one among the materials from which, in progressing with Culture we are to make something further, more human. Then further, in Emerson's saying 'Here are materials strewn,' I gather a reference to the men and women there are scattered (that is, as yet unsocial) along the ground, from which men and women are to be upbuilt. (Cavell 1989, 9)

We find this return to the ground and to ordinary life as revolutionary possibility in Terence Malick's recent film *To the Wonder* (2012), the ultra-contemporary symmetrical counterpart to his 2005 film *The New World*. *To the Wonder* is an unsettling film, and it is Malick's most explicitly romantic work; it allows us to place the entirety of his work under the rubric of American romanticism. The American ground was already a significant presence in Malick's first films, but whereas *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *The New World* displayed a wild, native nature—a wilderness in which humans were either lost or intruding—*To the Wonder* brings us back "to the rough ground," to use Wittgenstein's expression (2000, §107, 46); back to earth and to the dwelling of the ordinary. (Malick, a former student of Cavell's at Harvard and a translator of Heidegger, explicitly engages with the figures of Wittgenstein and Heidegger in his films). *To the Wonder* returns us to the lyricism of ordinary life, to our astonishment and amazement before the world: the world of nature, the world of art, the desolate and bleak world of everyday life in the small American town where the movie's two

heroes wind up. *To the Wonder*, far from contrasting wilderness and civilization, the romantic and the ordinary, the New World and Old Europe, organizes the circulation of these views of the world. The abbey of Mont Saint-Michel is naturalized, appearing like a mountain on the horizon; the undulating plains of Oklahoma are urbanized and humanized. In *The New World* we witnessed the debasement of the Native Americans' world by their European "civilizers"; *To the Wonder* takes disillusion and skepticism a step further, teaching us that there never was any first America, any wild, untouched land, any romantic wilderness. Thoreau had already said as much at Walden.

"Walden was always gone, from the beginning of the words of *Walden*...The first man and woman are no longer there" (Cavell 1992, 119). The nostalgia for an original purity of nature and of the human is the last illusion cinema must strip us of, while at the same time teaching us the miracle of this degraded world whose very imperfection and finitude carries us—"we want to walk: so we need friction!" (Wittgenstein 2000, §107, 46). For there is but one world; as one slogan puts it, "There is no Planet B". This is why romanticism is today, and always has been, post-romanticism, which gives it its visionary and revolutionary force: "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" (Thoreau 2004, 92).

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